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Kakei Senki wo Kakageyo! - WN Chapter 00-14

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Chapter 0: The day of the Sacred Flame Festival

A single man is burning.

In the middle of the piled up heap of firewood, a log is erected with a person affixed to it by iron chains. The raging flames, spurred on by the oil, are tormenting and teasing him. He is burning at the stake. He is being executed by flame. With a rumbling sound the blaze causes a searing wind. His meat is grilled and his life, snatched away.

The spectators erupted in excitement: young and old, men and women, rich and poor, every one of them roared with wide open eyes and mouths. It is the agitation of a crucible. Within this spectacle where sanity has vanished, the expressions of no more than three men and women were dyed in a different colour of emotion, contrary to their surroundings.

“Oh flame, hurry up and rise into the air! As this is a purification! It is a punishment following the flame’s judgement!”



「さあ、炎よ、立ち上るのだ！
これは浄化である！
炎の断罪である！」

A single person amongst them, a middle-aged man who'd grown fat, wearing a luxurious priest garb and standing upright on a similarly pompous balcony, announced in a thick and sonorous voice causing all eyes to be riveted upon him.

“This is the man who plotted to murder the truly gracious saint-like hero! This is an act of a devil! Above all, this is the proof that this man is an evil person! Our

sorrow is God's sorrow! Our rage is God's rage! This is his judgement!"

As he fervently gestured, sweat and saliva were scattered around. Nevertheless he spit out words from his mouth, endlessly. This pouring of oil onto this blazing scene fanned the agitation; even screams are beginning to occur within the roars of the spectators. It is a feast of the mad. If devils were a reality, then this extolling crowd would be exactly like them.

There is a little girl overlooking the scenery with a ghastly pale face. She is one of the previously mentioned 3 people. With a special seat by the window, perfectly situated for viewing as it is located at the second story of a building facing the plaza, she is trembling slightly without even being able to blink. Her body is wrapped in a neat and clean high-grade dress. Even the ornaments she wore were the same. There is a guardian knight keeping the perimeter secure.

"God, please take a good look at this! And then God shall give us his blessing! The one exposing the scheme of this man and the one giving us the honour to subjugate this evil man, the princess! The princess who is known to be wise! Bless this worthy woman who stayed resolute despite the loss of her beloved hero!"

As they turned their enthusiasm, as if raising a howl, in the direction of the window, the little girl made a small leap. She was attacked by tremendous dread. Her eyes, widened to a perfect circle, became blank as she tightly pursed her lips causing them to become purplish.

"... Su-Such a thing... because of me... "

She murmured those words with a weeping voice. The voice is weaker than a single drop of water before a great quantity of heat.

"Be-Because of me... not... such... "

There is no one listening. There isn't even a place her voice reaches. It is as if she barely managed to produce a feeble tone on top of her tongue. With a "plop" her legs gave in without the girl being aware of stepping back.

"Such... I feel sick... "

If those words had reached the last person, that person might have died in a fit of anger. In front of the blazing mountain currently roasting a man, a single

woman was held down by soldiers. While having her face pressed onto the stone paving, she is peering up. Wearing the attire of a village woman, her swelling muscles and body structure betray that she is no villager. She even had no trouble using the sword laying close-by.

Both pupils of her widely opened eyes were red. This didn't stand out as the whites of her eyes have become blood-shot. She was gritting her back teeth with a *gishiri gishiri* at the time he was dying. Her face, looking as if producing an Oni's expression, has a natural darkish complexion. Her silver hair reflects the colour of the flames. She seems to be a descendant of a minority.

She was the sole person in this place trying to rescue the man from being killed by the flames.

Her current state was the result of that. Unable to move, she had no other choice but to gaze at the situation in front of her. While receiving the tremors of the spectator's footsteps excitedly dancing without rest, her own soul is scorched by this hell-like spectacle.

Above the crowd ... in the middle of the orange-coloured scorching heat, something resembling a visibly black pillar collapses. Suddenly cheers of joy erupt. A stampede of footsteps erupts. Dishevelled hands and feet move about. That great tumult enjoys the misery of the corpse. Even the woman doesn't leak a single word.

"Oh! The judgement has been handed down! Rather than our flame, the evil person has now perished without a doubt!"

If this place is imitating an orchestra, this man garbed in priest's robes, will be the conductor? He is manipulating the wild enthusiasm of the crowd using his hands and mouth.

"From today, this day will become an anniversary of glory for sure! It is fine to sing, sons of god! And isn't it a reason for celebration?! On this day, at this time, the suffering up until now has become a thing of the past already! Now then, let's exchange sake cups together!"

People in white robes went around and distributed sake cups to each and every person. It appears they brought in an immeasurable amount of wine barrels in advance. It is completely like a festival. No, in reality this is doubtlessly

a festival. The blank space left behind by the subsided force of flames is filled by cheerful orchestral music, the singing of songs and the dancing crowds. The remaining amount of heat was beyond the control of mind and body ... throughout the night.

A single man's death.

It has become a grand feast before and after his death.

The entire city is raising a victory song into the night sky similar to a single bonfire.

Pretending that all of this is someone else's problem, several dark lines are extending outside, from the city. They are the irrigation channels and sewerage paths; both of which merge into one long, large flow. The flow is gentle; scattering nourishments to the surroundings while on the other hand gathering nourishments from the surroundings, it reaches the ocean before long.

With nothing but the dark starry sky being reflected below the water's surface ... the thing was even darker than the shadow of the night ... small black-coloured fishes were chewing continuously. While countless numbers of those same fish were swimming here and there, they are having their meal. Something looking like both small and large pieces of charcoal broke away as they are eating. Originally a figure of a single person now resembled the trash being thrown away from the city.

Pecking at the gathered lumps, stuffing their cheeks with each of the fragments dispersed by the water current, the small fishes didn't grow tired of devouring the charred remains of the corpse without leaving anything behind. Even this was rather courteous. In the end they cut into the important, precious interior of the corpse ... during the night, before even dawn came, it began to walk.

It walks. At first one. Then another one, having grown legs, show up underwater. Fish bodies with 2 ill-formed legs, heading towards the coast with unsteady steps, they are forcing their way through the weeds. They increased their speed in order to escape the draft of the river. At the start they had a poor half-fish half-man appearance, but gradually their shape was changing. Now they are running, sprinting black-coloured creatures, resembling rats.

Their way of movement crossing over the hills and passing through the moonlit plains was similar to a gust of wind completely sweeping up the soil. Countless numbers of black-coloured things filled with the scorched remains are rushing into the forest. Without minding the presences of the wriggling creatures, they ran at full speed to that place, an ominous and dreadful cave. They rush inside. Inside there is a flickering light. They hurry up. It is a flood that doesn't make a single sound ... The specks of darkness jumped into a jar on top of the stove.

A hoarse voice started to spin a song.

“How many years has it been since I saw such blazing soul... it is even astonishing for a magi...”

A small-built figure appeared, wearing a hood low over their eyes, in order to gather the torn pieces assuming the shape of a shadow. While leaning over the stove, a green, mysterious fire started to lick the jar.

“Blood is wisdom... Red is a curse... Gratitude and Grudge... Fate and Reluctance...”

The fire's blaze changes its colour from green to blue, from blue to purple and from purple to yellow. The darkness within the jar is boiling; however it isn't hot. This is no normal fire. The ingredients aren't normal either.

This is magic.

Eventually even the song withers, the fire has used up many colours and the jar develops a crack too.

The final product, a gooey liquid, has been created in this world. It was sealed within a small bottle.

This story will raise its curtains once this appears in the common world.

Chapter 1: Listen up! Read the newspapers

“Young master is a really, err, peculiar child.”

That peddler, with a grown beard, sighed without it being definite whether it was because he was surprised or shocked.

“It’s the surroundings of a remote region. I tell you, children everywhere are crazy about toys.”

In addition to peddling to the countryside so as to sell medicines and convenient general living-ware, he is also carrying things like spinning tops and wooden dolls. Given that those are light without being bulky, they will become a profit in itself, if he can sell them. For the most part it isn’t simple to sell these at the poor villages, but in every village there is around one or two families who possess a small sum of money.

The young boy, who doesn’t even take notice of the toys in front of him, is a person of such family possessing a small amount of money. *Is he around 5 or 6 years? With a charming look having blue eyes and black hair, the neat clothes he dons aren’t a local product of this village. It stands to reason as he is the son of the village headman here.*

The name of this village, laying at a valley with a huge mountain range concealing the sky in the north, is Kikomura. (T/N: Kiko village as mura = village) It is a settlement located in the north-east frontier area of Asuria Kingdom which governs the eastern part of the continent. The number of households is approximately 70? It is a fief at the tip of the territory of Earl Helrevi (T/N: >> Herurevi <<). Mekong wheat and Sierra wheat ... the so-called valuable and crude wheat of dry field farming, it is a common aspect of the unprocessed work in this profession. While having a small scale of lying fallow for other livestock, they are managing the meadow which is the source of the small sum of money, I guess?’ The peddler is estimating. The horses of this region have a high demand as warhorses.

“That’s right, this is a popular merchandise. Look! Three horses will stand in a line if you join this together...” (Peddler)

The peddler tried to resume the explanation but he heard the small sigh escaping the boy's mouth. With his polished experience at serving customers, he realised the young boy's boredom and disgust. Both are a taboo in business.

"Uh... well... Though I have the thing young master has talked about as well."
(Peddler)

Notwithstanding his confusion due to it being different from his usual knowledge in all ways the peddler took out a single parchment from within his luggage. It is a hazel-colored tube having a red string tied to it as fixation. It is an article, producing steady profits for the peddler by no more than delivering it to his regular customers with its contents of "Intended for the countryside" including the most recent major events.

"I know that I can't buy it. If you let me read it at this place, it won't be any problem." (Boy)

"No, look, there is a seal here, right? This is the publishers original and unique way of tying the knot..." (Peddler)

The young boy laughs through the nose with a sharp "Pfft!" This also had an impact. The peddler was overcome with surprise and couldn't do anything but looking at him due to young boy floating a cynical smile on his angel-like face.

"It isn't your first errand... Isn't it your forte to fix the knot?" (Boy)

Without waiting for an answer, he takes the parchment. In an experienced manner of using his hands he ended up removing the string. Was he worried about the direction of the sunlight? Moving as if lining up with the peddler, he sits down cross-legged and begins to read the newspaper poking his nose into it. The peddler was at a loss for words because this style was too much that of an



expert.

He appears to be reading carefully while murmuring some unspecified things and grumbling about such things as 「Good heavens! What absurdity with the pregnancy of the princess.」 「Such fat bishop has a successful career? The bishop gown is custom made, right?」 He makes somebody believe that he is one of those men grumbling over their wine cups in a bar of some city. This also feels extremely out of place since he is a child that still has quite a bit to go until his

voice changes.

“Thank you very much. Please treat me well again another time.” (Boy)

Having finished reading, the young boy gives a well-mannered bow and goes away at a brisk pace. In the end the peddler saw him off without being even able to leak a single word towards this spectacle. At the time of leaving he passed the parchment and the string alongside one nickel coin to the peddler. This is a reasonable price for browsing the newspaper in the provinces. As it was a fact that he paid this without having been even told about it, this matter was haunting the peddler.

After returning to reality, he chased after the young boy in a hurry. It's not like he had some premonition. It also isn't curiosity. It's not due to detecting a business opportunity either. It was simple fascination.

That young boy was prominent in his surroundings in many respects.

The village's children are gathering thoroughwort while walking, however only one single person is whistling and skilfully avoiding the mud of the narrow paths as he is within the noisy and clumsy group. Surrounded by bare-footedness and plain attires, which are handmade at each household, only he wears city-tailored clothes and leather shoes. Looking with a sidelong glance at the dust-covered, unkempt, ruffled hair of the other children, his own black hair, cut and evened up at the top of the shoulders, is swaying with a rustling.

The clamouring and bustling group arrived at the bottom of a big camphor tree. Even as the spring sun, increasing its warmth day by day, shines, the shadow of the meagre foliage is jolting in the tree's circumference. Gathering at the roots of the group of big trees with a “Hurry!”, they began to split the division of labour for the luggage they had accumulated. Small wooden chairs, a black-painted wooden board, blackboard chalk and an old rag.

“Okay, I think we can get started, but...”

The wooden board, passably painted in black, was also leaned against the trunk of the camphor tree. It is dirty as if it became overcast with it all around. The purpose is obvious. This is a classroom. It takes place to educate some certain person.

They might realise this, however, they might not understand it, the peddler judges. Nowadays the stench of war has become thin in this world, but if thieves

appear, refugees will wander around. There is still some way to go before many people become diligent in their everyday's life. Even in the royal capital something like education for the poor people can't be seen being brought up.

"For some reason there is an unnecessary visitor." (Boy)

Although you say this, are you carrying out education here, in such place you can very well call the sticks... ? Furthermore, the one teaching them is the young boy standing close to the youngest. The youngest has such a small build that you can't even see their figure if you don't figure out a way of positioning them without overlapping the front and rear by teaching each of them in a fan form.

"Whoa... somehow it's slightly uncomfortable." (Peddler)

Possibly this might be the fairy world as it is depicted in illustrated stories. Although it is too expensive for treating it as merchandise, I have read such book in a rental library. The bearded peddler has gotten to know the sweetness as well as the sourness of life, but here he was dreaming of his childhood. If you look at it from that point of view...

"The study time is precious. I will suitably punish anyone who obstructs it."
(Boy)

Look at me! ... Aren't the fairies, peeking over here, getting slowly closer? The smiling peddler showed his spread arms. Some warm presentiment was arising in his body which has been toughened up by being exposed to the northern winds. It was a misunderstanding.

The peddler had his beard cruelly poked and plugged in an encirclement of goblins. Even though they apologized he had to pay a fee for studying by observation. That fee was one nickel coin.

The peddler, listening to the teaching, believed it to be a suitable fee, no even cheap. *Cheap. Although the lot of children is most likely taking the lessons for free, learning the teaching contents would even lead to prosperity in the city, even if they had to pay a nickel coin each time for example. Those contents are reading, writing and calculation, but the presented examples and problem are really wordly-minded. It's quite novel.*

For example concerning the reading and writing: The general education institutions are largely influenced by the church. Principally the students are

repeatedly practising by copying the contents of the scriptures which is something simply disturbing. The scriptures are the sorts of myths and tales. However it is different here.

“Please, go on reading. 『You can do it if you try. It’s impossible if you don’t try. At least try it.』” (Boy)

“”You can do it if you try. It’s impossible if you don’t try. At least try it.”” (Children)

“『If it isn’t possible today, try tomorrow once again.』” (Boy)

“”If it isn’t possible today, try tomorrow once again.”” (Children)

Wordly-minded things are the best. Don’t you understand it. The peddler is striking his knees.

“Let’s write it down. 『If you want siblings, go to sleep early.』” (Boy) (T/N: Lol)

“Sensei~, why is it good to go sleep early?” (Child)

“That’s because your parents have their own circumstances as well. The magic of children is a secret of romance.” (Boy)

The young boy is teaching them outrageous things with a refreshing smile. If the things they hear during the night contain screams and moans, they should report it to him. He is adding one thing to another of which all of them are close to a crime of conscience. What vulgarity for his social standing as you can say that there won’t be anything appearing from his groin for several more years, while thinking that, the peddler, however, was also eager to listen to the gathered reports.

The exercises for calculation were unusual for the current education while being a frequently seen subject for business transactions. How many goods can be obtained with the funds being 10 sacks of Mekong wheat? ... This was the story of a single villager going to the shopping district of the city and repeatedly having fierce fights with money as their weapon.

“Uu... I have decided! Since I will sell Mekong wheat to the Moon company, I will buy clothes at the Flower shop and fish at the River shop!” (Child)

“I will divide the Mekong wheat and sell it to the Star company and the Sun

company. I will buy shells at the Grass shop and clothes at the River shop!”
(Child)

“Okay, once you have decided the method, please calculate all of the transactions on top of the goods and the remaining money and hand in the board through the enclosed square. Those of you, who are empty-handed, study by observing how I grade them.” (Boy)

As person in the same trade I can't help but smack my lips towards the subject. The children, each establishing virtual shops, are rebating and pricing the detailed transaction while considering everything such as freebies. They repeat the calculations over and over again to reap the best profits. It should be noticed that a part of the children are even using multiplication alongside addition and subtraction. Possibly there might even be a child using division mixed in amongst them. It is a frightening matter ... it's not like they are merchant apprentices either.

No no! Above all else the young boy, seemingly training those children, is certainly the most terrifying by far.

Even during the time each of the children scattered as the lesson finished, the peddler didn't move from the spot due to his restlessness. The young boy is still surrounded by several children at the root of the camphor tree. He is talking very politely as he also deals with questions after the lesson. The peddler continues to wait until everyone has left.

“Although I won't complain about the payment part... it's free, for you as well.” (Boy)

He snorts without seeming to be interested either. The young boy tries to take his leave to also go somewhere else. While the peddler himself thinks that he had a fantastic time from an objective point of view, he walked in line with the young boy as he rubbed his hands together.

“No, it was a wonderful lesson. Has this village some relation to a merchant?”
(Peddler)

“If only around one peddler like you comes per season, it's a happy occasion. It's the sticks here.” (Boy)

“That is, well..., it's true... So, why are you teaching arithmetic to such a degree

then... ?” (Peddler)

“It will become difficult to cheat them if they are able to calculate. It’s the wisdom of surviving by being economical.” (Boy)

There is no person without any kind of pretension. On the contrary, it is sarcasm if you relate it to a merchant. It is common sense for the peddler to force an expensive sale and beat down the prices so it becomes cheap to buy things from unknowing countrymen.

“Well, then has your father been a merchant before?” (Peddler)

“He is a genuine farmer. Mother seems to be the same. There haven’t even passed 30 years since we started the pioneering around here, but many of the villagers have lived for a little longer time at their home villages close to the territory’s metropolis. You get the meaning, right?” (Boy)

“That is... they have been put through trouble to leave there, yes?” (Peddler)

As the Asuria Kingdom is preserving against the rivalling Empire Eberia in the west in authority and territory, it has resulted in the rapid restoration here in the last few years. It is a story after the so-called “Sacred Flame Festival.” Before that it has been 50 years filled with wars with no end in sight. 30 years ago Asuria was pressed for time as the invasion of Eberia advanced. Asuria Kingdom was at disadvantage as its south had barely any resisting forces remaining and its central and northern part began to be dyed in Eberia’s color. The occupation in war time was sometimes accompanied by pillaging the previous rulers. For the sake of avoiding this, they had no chance but to flee to the south or scatter in the remote regions. The village here might be one amongst those villages had been formed by people who chose the latter. Deeply considering the village’s past, the peddler suddenly became aware of it. *He’s different.* It’s not like he could have confirmed these matters by himself. He quickly closed the slightly opened distance to the young boy and asked,

“I want to ask you a little something, but young master, tell me, until how far can you use arithmetic?” (Peddler)

“Around the level that I would be able to work as clerk in a store.” (Boy)

“Yes!?” (Peddler)

The young boy floats cruel smile as if handling a subordinate and turns his look to the peddler, who raised his voice in astonishment, for the first time.

“You are a merchant if you live shrewdly. The condition of restoring the domestical affairs will still continue for a while longer. The wonderful aspect is that success or failure depends on their own ability. Above all, such things as wiping the idiot’s buttocks and dealing with the simpleton’s wilfulness won’t kill them either.” (Boy)

He should be 5 or 6 years old. He should be a child of a farmers village in a remote region. In the blue eyes of the young boy, the peddler saw unknown depth and a frightening glim that ought to cause dread. Due to the nature of his job he had met many people, but he can’t recall to be exposed to such a strong intensity.

No... there was only one person coming close to this, he remembers. However, he was a person who didn’t change his mind due to the ordinary. There are numerous anecdotes related to him based on unreliable information. The evaluation passed by the majority of society makes the peddler uncomfortable. In history it is mentioned that he was a man, a hero blessed by the church and in love with the princess, that hatched plans and deceived others leading him to an atrocious death. In his blood thirst, he was a lunatic who found joy in murder, be it friend or foe. He was an devilish person attempting to harm human society using the chaos of the war to his advantage.

In the days when his beard was still shaved neatly, the peddler met Salomon at the camp of the Asuria Kingdom’s volunteer army. It was at the time of delivering supplies. The soldier, in charge of the supplies, didn’t want to pay the full amount. Saying that it was emulated by the war, he was threatened by swords and spears. In that situation Salomon appeared and judged the responsible soldier with the words 「That’s embezzlement」. After that he joined the business negotiation with 「Won’t you give us a discount since you are buying other people’s goods as well?」 It was a good transaction, he is recalling. Salomon. Hadn’t he already passed the age of 30 in these days? That guy wielded a single sword in the front and rear with an overwhelming presence... That is the closest he is able to remember. Though he is a young boy who shouldn’t even be able to hold a sword.

“Young master... what’s your name?” (Peddler)

If he were to call himself Salomon, I might agree.

“It’s Marko.” (Marko)

It is a different name. But that’s only natural. However, that name etched an impression into the mind of the peddler that wouldn’t disappear. And this gave birth to a faint premonition in which he didn’t err what was unusual for him. Namely.

(I got to know Marko. The world still doesn’t know about Marko. Isn’t this disparity godsend? Even though my hands can’t reach the dragons soaring in the sky, if it’s a very young dragon still crawling on the ground... In case I can grasp even one single of its scales, it might become possible to view a celestial scenery even for an ordinary person like me.) (Peddler)

In later years, at the time when Marko takes heart to lead an army on this continent which had grown tense, a man with the name of Lauri (*T/N: >> Rauri*) will rise to be his sole trusted friend. He is a man wandering the remote regions as peddler after running away as he didn’t approve of taking part in the noble’s injustice being a sales clerk of a prominent shop.

Marko and Lauri.

In this spring and this remote region the pair’s relationship can also be seen as similar to an intelligent child and his imbecile father. The lord and retainer, widely-known in the world for their art of war, couldn’t be discerned in this appearance of bygone days at all.

Chapter 2: The hand of mine is short and frail

While stepping firmly on the lush summer grass, the children played with each other as they fell on the ground. Lauri can't help but to lower the corners of his eyes while seeing the charming appearance of the children, laughing every time they discover a wild flower or an insect.

But, as he moves his eyes away, he can't help but to have his eyebrows draw closer by the sight in front of him. This is Kikomura. Another season has passed since he made arrangements to visit more frequently as a peddler. Each time he comes, Lauri is surprised in one way or another.

(Is that one playing as well? ... he's quite absorbed in it.) (Lauri)

The children are repeatedly throwing stones facing something like a wooden framework, most of them being boys. They are separated by around 5 adult steps as they throw, aiming with serious expressions. The children are throwing the stones with considerable speed, the sound made when the children succeed at hitting the target is particularly noticeable.

"At this distance it is a match of speed. First you have to be able to hit your target. Next you have to hit it consecutively. To achieve that goal there is something you need to do. Your way of throwing has to be without any waste, and the trick to that, lies in the wrist." (Marko)

It is of course Marko who is saying this, and immediately after, demonstrates as an example. Lauri isn't surprised about that any longer. Picking up 3 pebbles, he sharply throws the 3 of them in succession by turning his wrist upside down. *Snap Snap Snap*, they hit with a gratifying sound. The surrounding children, after observing this with amazement showing in their faces, immediately resume the throwing, emulating his actions.

Collecting the stones a short while later, they increase the distance by around another 5 steps, and once again start to throw. After increasing the distance several times in that manner, the event came to an end after the majority of children could no longer make the stones reach the target.

"You came, Lauri-san?" (Marko)

"Good day, Marko-kun." (Lauri)

Lauri doesn't ever take lightly this charming child who's doing a refreshing greeting. The reason he visits this village so frequently is for the sake of meeting this young boy. He spends his time to build a friendly relationship... and in addition, that's his sole reason to come to this place so frequently.

"That completely looked like a scene from a military drill. Is it for the sake of defending the village?" (Lauri)

"By no means. The goal is individual self-defence." (Marko)

"Is that so? I think if it's in a group like that, stone throwing will become a threat too, but..." (Lauri)

"If the objective was to be group combat, we would train with slingshots. We can get those ready right away if we knit some strings. If it's in the shape of the previously used rods, you can even increase the range. It will become even more effective depending on the method of manufacture, and by also sorting the stones in regards to their shape and size to a certain extent." (Marko)

"Eh, ah, uh huh... that's right..." (Lauri)

With a friendly grin the child is easily talking about military affairs.

"Leaving that aside, did you get your hands on the thing that I requested from you?" (Marko)

"Yea, just as you told me, I went and checked up on the remains of that battlefield. It really was there. Take a look and confirm it, it's in the back." (Lauri)

"You have saved me. With this I will be able to comfortably pass the winter." (Marko)

"If you are saying this, I guess it has to be like that. However, you know quite a lot about it..." (Lauri)

"Both armies passed the winter there. After that the war situation shifted greatly. It would be strange if nothing had been abandoned in the area." (Marko)

While harmoniously talking, both of them headed towards village headman's house. A large group of buildings is located within the village surrounded by a mud wall. Firewood and large cooking tools, mixed together with a single heavy-looking jute bag have been placed in an extended room covered by a shingle roof

normally used for buildings. As Marko approaches and opens it, there is black soil, withered weeds and a countless number of grains that flowed out.

“Did you carry it all inside, including the soil? I’m sure it was heavy.” (Lauri)

“No, I am not really well-acquainted with agriculture. It’s the dreadfulness of collection mistakes” (Marko)*(T/N: The collection here is pointing to the collection of taxes the village headman oversees, I think)*

“It seems you were put through various troubles thanks to that.” (Lauri)

“What are you saying, it will be fine if you feel even a smidgen of gratitude.” (Marko)

While talking lightheartedly, the two turn their view on one grain that has fallen onto Marko’s palm. It is a seed. This was the thing Marko had requested from Lauri. It was obtained by searching the ground where the armies of the Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire confronted each other before. In a corner of that wasteland... those were buried amid weeds behind the Asuria Kingdom’s army headquarters.

“But, if you mean this, it is used as feed for warhorses, no? It is qwamp, right?” (Lauri) *(T/N: >> kuwanpu <<)*

“It’s a root crop you can harvest from spring to winter if you sow it in autumn. Although it isn’t possible to store it after harvesting, since it can be grown well even on barren soil, those are used as the army’s supplement feed at the front. You can also use it as food depending on the way it is cooked.” (Marko)

“And you also know the recipe, right? Honestly, you are a walking library, aren’t you...?” (Lauri)

If you peek into his face as if probing into it, you will find the young boy’s usual blue eyes and thin smile.

“Some things are mysterious.” (Marko)

This type of unknown mystique, the obvious sense of discomfort and the somehow corrupted charm... those are all shining within the indifferent immaturity of his blue eyes. It might be some kind of evilness, Lauri is guessing. Once one is enchanted by him, it becomes impossible to withdraw, but still, he

resolves himself to it.

“You are... For what reason are you in this village?” (Lauri)

Suddenly the question escaped from his mouth. Lauri was surprised by his own words. *It is obvious that Marko is trying to do something to enrich this village. This is a natural objective for the one who's set to become the next village headman. Things like education, qwamp and even stone throwing... thinking about it, Lauri picked up on the strangeness there.*

Marko appears to have reasonable wisdom and a mature demeanor. The most childish aspect would be that personality of his, but... he wants to integrate everything with the goal of raising the village's prosperity, even if the methods are devious. The qwamp is fine. As for the stone throwing, without even considering for the children to bear the village's defense, it's not like you can reject the possibility of people being stolen by kidnappers or having their lives taken by wolves in the future.

However, Lauri thinks. I don't understand the education. The subjects Marko is teaching to the village's children, won't contribute in any way to increase the village's productivity. The adults are the ones who negotiate in the city. If it's complicated business discussions, only Marko will be able to finish the negotiations. There is no need for everyone to be able to calculate.

The fundamental duties of a village and a merchant are different. The former is a primary industry and yields profit by mass producing products, even if it is done by manual labour. The latter is a tertiary industry and yields profits by means of trading. The people, needing to receive education, were those of the trade section. If it's a production site like the village, no matter how much they are even able to read, write and calculate, it is pearls thrown before swine. Marko said it was something like 「For the sake of not incurring losses」, but... for the ordinary villager the scene of incurring loss in itself is seldom.

To begin with, I wonder if the person called Marko is someone who wants to spend his entire lifetime in this single remote village he comes from? Those piercing blue eyes are always gazing at a far-away place, Lauri thinks. It's unnatural to imagine him passing the time in this village trying to hide his tremendous intensity from people. It's as if his seriousness can't be seen... like he only appears to amuse himself by his own caprice.

“They aren’t yet enough... my hands and feet.” (Marko)

As he said this, he reached out with his right hand. The fingertips looked plump with the softness of a child, but he was extending them towards the sky as if he was yearning for something.

“The length as well as the strength are insufficient. These hands can neither hold nor handle sword or spear. These feet can’t even ride a horse as they are. It’s impossible to fight with them. This body is far too diminutive... and there is nothing I can do about it either.” (Marko)

He tensely stretches his fingers to the limits and then grasps his right hand tightly. What are you trying to catch? What is it you can’t reach? Why are you grieving? Lauri can’t even give an educated guess. However, Lauri strengthened his conviction due to the impressive words leaking out from Marko. This young boy is unmistakably a dragon among men, when the time comes, he will soar through the skies.

“I thought about the possibility of leaving this village as fast as possible, but...” (Marko)

Marko said with a small and soft voice.

“However, I came from my parents. Father is growing old and mother is laying in bed for long periods. Even if I am able to hand over the duty of being village headman, if I think about the modest happiness of my family, I won’t be able to do something as rash as running away from home.” (Marko)

Mysteriously, he shows a smile in his content facial expression as he speaks about his worries. *This appears to be similar to something very embarrassing, seeing this Lauri somehow felt warm.*

“I think it will be good, if the village is wealthy. And it is the same if the people of the village become determined. I think that will be good as well. Do you know? A healthy organization isn’t successful because of a single person. It is something moderately managed by a great number of people. That way, as soon as the organization becomes complex, any extremes of that complexity will be rejected giving birth to the thing called stability.” (Marko)

The things he speaks about happily are likely about the village’s future after

he left. You can sense a certain amount of longing there. Once the future reaches that point, once the children from that open-air class begun managing the village, the figure of the grown Marko won't be found within this abundant scenery any longer. I wonder if he isn't feeling the loneliness of hoping for it to be that way and of predicting it to be so?

"You can't build up something regular alongside an unusual existence. In the not so far future I will be standing on the battlefield. The time for staying in this village isn't long. The remainder is 5 or 10 years... of me being in this place. But the reason for me to be in this village is also to sow various seeds during my stay here." (Marko)

Turning over the qwamp seed with his finger as if it is important, Marko concludes like that. Lauri couldn't agree more with his words of considering himself "unusual."

Rather than unusual, he is abnormal. This young boy called Marko.

As far as Lauri knows there are no other children like him. If they are capable of dressing themselves at 5-6 years, it will be good. If they were able to do simple calculations, I would think of them to be superior to others of their age. Reading through the newspaper, teaching writing, reading and calculation, instructing in the art of stone throwing for self-defense, while also planning to introduce new crops. Is there any other child like this?

(Even as a joke, it isn't funny... I don't intend to talk to anyone about this either.)
(Lauri)

Furthermore, these are no more than the apparent abnormalities. Lauri isn't scared about these parts. The absolutely strange things are his look, his behavior, his tone... his pressure as a human being. According to Lauri's awareness, this young boy is a far older being than himself.

Although Marko is careful due to the warning of 「You are strangely conspicuous」, no matter what he says, he always does it while using polite honorific language.

And if you are thinking about the foundation of his dignity, it will be the mysterious knowledge he has. When I combine each of the fragments of the stories I come into contact with occasionally, the young boy, Marko, appears to have experience in going to the front and serving in public duty. It's the personal

experience of a member of the volunteer army, rather than the regular army, in a war. He has the same level of experience, as a merchant, as the owner of a large store. It feels like all those experiences are living within his small body. (It can't be. It shouldn't be, but... 『Some things are mysterious』, huh?)(Lauri) Even though there is a dangerous glint in those blue eyes, without being able to say whether it exists or not, Lauri swallows it all due to Marko's charm.

"... Will there be another war?" (Lauri)

"I have no doubt about it. Strategically it is already happening. The existence of wars is determined by the existence of both countries, as long as there is a here and there. 『Is the Plain of Wandering Calamity today red as well?』 it is." (Marko)

"Hahaha. I know that one as well. 『What blood is red?』." (Lauri)

It is a front line song previously made when the Asuria Kingdom began to be repressed by the Eberia Empire's fierce attacks. It has started to be sung once again on the streets in recent years, as the circumstances of those days returned.

""『There is no noble's wine as red as both country's commoner's blood.』"" (Marko & Lauri)

Singing uniformly at the top of their voices, they laughed when they faced each other.

"Ah! There you were! Boy, dancing in such a place!!" (Hannah)

The laughter was brushed away because of the high-pitched angry voice. It was a woman vigorously stepping up in a daunting manner causing her feet to make a sound as it kicked the soil, her name is Hannah. Quirky dark brown hair casually suspended with a square knot, she has caught Marko glaring at him with a face full of unyielding spirit.

"What's this, in such a place, about? It's the back of our home, Hannah." (Marko)

Marko's expression looks as if he has somehow given up. Lauri was aware about her circumstances, too. *Her age is ranging around 20 years? As she quickly lost her husband in an accident, she is the helper who lives and works in*

Marko's home by helping nursing his mother. And, it looks like the term "helper" sometimes extends to Marko as well.

"Although I heard you were playing at the bottom of the hill, you weren't there when I went to get you! Passing your time by doing something like making things out of dirt... let's go wash your hands first. Come on, hurry, your mother is waiting for you." (Hannah)

Getting Marko on his feet like a spring and brushing the dust off his clothes, she takes him away partly carrying him under her arms. *With their battle history so far, him, the dragon, has resigned himself to his fate I guess. He shows a blank expression and even his blue eyes are halfway closed.* But Lauri saw it. The seed of qwamp he held in his hand... this, labeled as "making things out of dirt," has been returned skilfully into the bag with a splendid performance before it could be brushed away.

"Hahaha, in all ages, women are a mighty force to deal with." (Lauri)

Lauri hit the jute bag, which had been burdened with those troublesome seeds, with a slap, after Marko had vanished from that spot in a somehow exciting manner.

(This is his ordinary daily life... looking at it, he leads a normal life. When all's said and done, I am a sinful traveler who seduces a cute young country boy. It's my natural luck that makes me not be seen as a kidnapper... or not, I wonder if it was Marko who made the necessary arrangements?) (Lauri)

What are you yearning for? Lauri stood up.

(I want the sleeping dragon, who wears the skin of a young boy, to show me his intention. I want to also know the concrete outlook of things. For the sake of supporting him to the maximum once he starts, I have to accomplish something above what he has asked of me without him arranging it.) (Lauri)

He tries to stretch his right hand towards the sky. The length is that of an adult arm, however he can't sense the degree of strength as shown by that small arm. *That was the hand of someone cutting through eras. Although he looked as if being strangely dissatisfied with his childish frailness, even that has already surpassed the expectations of an ordinary person I think. To where will you lead the world?*

He grasps his hand tightly. *I don't know what he wants to grab with his hands.*

Even I am unable to predict it to that extent. However, it is plain to see that he wants to seize something with his own hands. It's a dragon's scale. As result of that I will be able to see the future of conquest with my own eyes.

(For that reason... yeah, this is certainly something inevitable. If it's him, he has realized it. It's something beyond his power since it's forbidden.) (Lauri)

Nodding with an uh-huh, Lauri headed towards the entrance of the village headman's house. There is one set of pretty children's clothing on the package in his back. *Let's improve my current standing with something like this requested present, desired by Hannah as well as Marko's mother...* he makes the decision.

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Chapter 3: The dearly missed atmosphere of kendo sounds

It has become the season of leaves being scattered by the wind. The faces of all those walking in the shopping district has a tinge of sudden sharpness. The cold acts like a whetstone. Without even fire or hammer, it appears to polish your very nature.

“Hmm, it’s nothing but a few farming tools and kitchen knives.” (Oiva)

While gulping down the sake cup in broad daylight at a bar, he looks out onto the street. Oiva Otara(*T/N: >> Oivua Otara <<*)stared at the flow of people with glazed eyes. He is a giant. It appears that, not only one chair can’t accommodate his entire body, but that it will break apart under the body’s weight it has to support. He is shallowly sitting on two chairs lined up next to each other in a skillful manner. He wears a combination of a yellow casual dress and a black hood, apparently being the choice of a refined person. But since he is big, he leaves the impression of being a sumo wrestler or an actor with superhuman strength in the end.

“What was it about kitchen knives, sir?” (Owner)

An old man came out from the bar’s interior with its sparse customers and placed another sake bottle on Oiva’s table.

“Oy, oy, owner, I didn’t really request this... did I?” (Oiva)

“The guy who sharpened my kitchen knife is quite excellent you know?” (Owner)

The old man laughs and displays a somewhat large kitchen knife. Oiva also laughed and lightly accepted the sake cup and held it reverently over his head. Although he is now a wanderer, he once served as a swordsmith. 1 or 2 kitchen knives are a trifling matter. He was born as the fourth son of a knight’s household living in a castle. He possesses a career of becoming an apprentice in smithing, after being naturally disinherited from nobility because of his family’s poor conditions.

“However, if you are this skilled, why does it look as if you’ve got plenty of free

time?” (Owner)

“That is... well... even I dislike the free time, but...” (Oiva)

Oiva pouts skilfully shrinking his large build.

“There isn’t any good workplace for me.” (Oiva)

He sipped the sake with a strangely pitiful appearance as he revealed this. Though he wants to drown in drunkenness, he can’t get drunk at all. And yet, gulping down the alcohol while feeling downhearted, he makes sure to watch the others enjoying themselves without himself being able to blend in there. He continues to observe the bustling on the street. The bar’s owner, heaving a single sigh, returned to the kitchen for the purpose of making snacks to go with the sake for this fine fellow who acts like a big child.

“Ah... this world has become detestable.” (Oiva)

There is a town close to the fief’s capital in the territory of Earl Helrevi in the north-eastern part of Asuria Kingdom. Having allowed this area to be dominated by the Eberia Empire during the war, this land is now regaining its prosperity after the “Sacred Flame Festival.” It’s military supplies that are holding up this restoration.

The territory of Earl Salmant(*T/N: >> Sarumanto <<*) in the north-western part of the kingdom has put its local emphasis on military affairs centered around the territory of Earl Peterius. If you go even further west from there, you will enter the “Plain of Wandering Calamity.” Beyond that the dominion of the old enemy, Eberia Empire, is stretching out. The territory of Earl Helrevi, being the region closest to the front line, is playing the important role of providing the supplies. Especially, its horses are excellent. If you go too far into the east you will reach the “Desert of No Life.” There you won’t find any activity of life, with its miasma leaking from the large ice fields in the north. However, in reverse, it is a flourishing area right until you reach the desert. The horses are forged by the wind having slight parts of miasma mixed in, making them tenacious. The area is blessed with a meadow as well.

For that reason there is a large demand of horseshoe production for a blacksmith. This town also had numerous smithies doing their business here. On the other hand, there is only scarce work related to swords. But that was fine for Oiva anyway. If he just wants to forge swords, it will be fine for him to head to

the west. It is only a matter of wandering. Besides, if it's horseshoes, there isn't any problem for it to be the only work of a blacksmith either.

The mood that is widely circulating in Asuria Kingdom is unpleasant. The passion for restoration is similar to the fire in a furnace. The prosperity of the people is also similar to the bursting of a spark. However, each of them appears to be engulfed in the detestable color of rust.

Two carriages of upper ranks are moving in front of his eyes. Oiva once again scowled seeing the designs decorated on the sides of the carriages. It's a drawing of an angel helping the hero stand up. *This is it. These things are praised extravagantly as fashion and make this society disgusting.*

(You can say it is exaggerated if it's the hero, but the point is, didn't he just die in defeat?)(Oiva)

He drains the sake cup in one go. It isn't delicious. The exaggerated grief over the unnatural death of the hero is connected to the vitality of the restoration... If such "drunken sickness" spreads within, even sake will become bad. He can't bear it after the abuse by the evil man, Salomon. Even something like his desire to work has disappeared.

(Shouldn't a general acknowledge the value of victory or defeat? He is a hero that let many defeated allies die. But I suppose the methods of General Salomon gained victory and saved the kingdom.) (Oiva)

Oiva isn't amused. Because of that he advanced through the wars according to the army commanded by the hero. And under that command death was wandering about. There was only one person among them saved because of the army led by Salomon.

It was a horrible defeat and Oiva remembers the situation at that time even now. No matter where you looked, hundreds of enemy flags were flying. They continued to kill his allies as if relentlessly breaking them into bite-sized pieces. With the path of retreat completely cut off, the many noble commanders gave disarranged orders just causing panic. Though he has a blessed physique, without any horse and armour, as the campaign's blacksmith specialist, Oiva's life was in a truly precarious situation.

(Well, it wasn't something you could handle with the martial arts of a single person.) (Oiva)

The hero's troops lacked cooperation with their allies and advanced too far. /

don't understand whether it was something owed to the situation, but it is a definite fact that the location, where the army set up, was extremely foolish. The responsibility for that was with the leader, the hero, Oiva judges. Family honor and individual strength, appearance and titles, all of these don't matter at all.

(A soldier can't see far ahead. The general, who has a better view, has to fight cunningly.) (Oiva)

If you ask, the hero, having ferocious courage, defeated many enemy soldiers. This might certainly be magnificent, but it probably isn't a too commendable deed as a "soldier." No matter how many enemies he killed in front of his eyes, the fault of him causing the entire army to be killed due to his bad leadership won't disappear.

In the end it resulted in completely beating the enemy due to the assisting allies. It was Salomon who led that allied group of volunteers. Without a doubt it was Salomon who ruled the battlefield as winner. That overwhelming victory definitely removed the threat of the Eberia Empire.

(So what about it? The hero is a legendary general who used merciless means to kill. I want to ask how this gave rise to today's peace!? Every last of them doesn't realize it... Ah I can't stand it, I can't bear it.) (Oiva)

Gulping down one sake after the other, and yet not getting drunk, Oiva slowly walked towards a back alley. Among the tenement houses built in great quantity in the early days of the restoration, there is a single room with a bed in a bad and complicated neighborhood, it is even particularly exposed to the sun. With a small parterre and kitchen. The entire wooden floor is covered if he alone lies sprawling on it. He sleeps. He sulks while sleeping.

Passing the period of time, where most people are sweating due to work, he sleeps. At a suitable time once the day turned dark, he slowly got out of bed. Drinking one ladle full of water, he once again leaves the room. His pace is light. Passing across several alleys, he went towards his destination. It was a building looking like a weathered meeting place.

"Oy, oy, all of you are together." (Oiva)

He greeted the figures of the men, already drenched in sweat, in front of him in a friendly tone. With equal lightweight equipment, they are holding a wooden sword or a "bamboo-bundled sword" in their hands. The group, forming a circle,

apparently meets up frequently to exercise.

“You are late, Oiva. We have already begun the training, but you can only join us after finishing 1’000 practice swings and physical exercises.”

“I know, I know.” (Oiva)

Getting a particularly thick and long wooden sword from the rack in the corner, Oiva slowly started to do calisthenics for his shoulders and hip. While he was elaborately training his legs and loins, the men began to yell out their fighting spirit and the sounds of strikes resounded. This place is an unauthorized dojo where the town’s martial arts lovers meet up and diligently practice. For the current Oyvua it is the one place he can enjoy himself.

“Yo, let’s mix it up?” (Oiva)

Questionably glossing over the number of practice-swings, he participates cheerfully in the training. If it was a military drill of the army, they would wear defensive equipment on top and exchange blows with weapons having a dulled blade, but it is unthinkable for them to have the money to prepare something like this here. They use bamboo-bundled swords. They fixed 4 bamboo pieces into one bundle. For the sake of the blows being buffered, the center of the bundle is hollow. Without defensive equipment, they won’t injure their bones even if they use their full strength. *The weapon has literally no weight. There isn’t any weight from armor either. It is indeed unsatisfactory for someone like me who experienced a campaign.*

(It’s fine to learn the principle behind the techniques of martial arts. It isn’t such a valuable deed to kill all kinds of people either.) (Oiva)

While handling the launched sword strikes like a gale, Oiva was happy. For him, who was blessed with muscle strength and constitution, the training with bamboo-bundled swords isn’t a place to display his true strength. It was in the category of half-playing-around, but even so it possessed a charm he was indeed engrossed with.

In the first place, it was Oiva who brought those bamboo-bundled swords to this dojo. They were things actually used by the volunteer army for their military drills in the middle of the campaign. He used a chance to borrow one to understand their structure.

(It is the most suitable weapon to train those guys using farming tools to fight.)

(Oiva)

Its main structural secret is the necessity to fill the bamboo-bundled swords with small iron scrapes in its center. Whether this is a lie or the truth, that's what Salomon suggested. Although the regular army looked at it and considered it to be 「Feeble」 and thus didn't imitate it, for Oiva himself, who prefers to use martial arts to push his way through and to kill, the bamboo-bundled swords were fascinating.

(Besides, something like a sword with a dulled blade is disgusting. I don't want to touch it. I don't want to touch it.) (Oiva)

While also receiving numerous hits to his shoulders and elbows, he gives a clean, single blow to the crown of the head at the same time. It is Oiva who finished the training after handling numerous people. Stopping the competition at a suitable time chosen at one's own discretion after mutually exchanging opponents was the style of this dojo.

However, he is unlucky as there isn't a next opponent. The fights are at their peak everywhere. At such occasion he withdrew to the vicinity to wipe his sweat with a towel. He noticed a single child standing at the entrance of the dojo. It isn't particularly prohibited to study by observation at this place, but it is a time where it gradually gets darker. And, the public order of this area isn't good as well.

As he is about to call out to the child with a "Good grief!" ... Oiva was startled.

(What a sharpness... this guy isn't a normal person.) (Oiva)

With an elegant attire excellently tailored and silky, black hair, he has a dignified look. His age is 5 or 6 years... However, as for all of these facts, his true nature is far ahead. It's the eyes. Brightly blue and dazzling, with a charming, mysterious glint too. As if having a trace of a cursed sword that has consumed countless souls... a desire for battle reaching the point of danger.

(1'000 or 10'000... no above that, huh...? Anyway, those are the eyes of someone holding the death of an outrageous number of people on top of his palm. Damn! What-the-hell!) (Oiva)

Is he human? Or is he something called a demon? Oiva couldn't do anything other but being dumbfounded. He couldn't move. As if trying to stand on top of a blade that could easily split him in two. *I wonder if this won't happen after all?* He made a big sound of gulping down his saliva.

“Ah, sorry, I willfully allowed myself to observe you.” (Marko)



As the voice, sounding like a bell, reached him, Oiva suddenly regained his consciousness. In front of his eyes is a child with a strangely mature facial expression showing a polite attitude in his direction. *Was I watching a daydream? It was different.* Oiva ascertained the sweat of his tightly grasped

palms with his fingertips.

“Y-Yea, it’s fine to observe as much as you want. But, you have to put one bronze coin in that box if you want to participate.” (Oiva)

He points at the wooden box at the side of the entranceway. It’s money paid for the sake of continuing to borrow this meeting place. It is also used to shoulder the costs of materials such as the bamboo-bundled sword which are consumable goods. By the way, as Oiva is the producer of the bamboo-bundled swords, he is exempted from paying the participation fee.

“No, I am not up to the task for that. Hearing a dearly missed sound... I merely succumbed to its charm.” (Marko)

Saying this, he looked fondly at the scene of the training. *There isn’t any trace of the glint in his eyes, that previously caused me to shudder, any more. I don’t think I saw it wrongly. I fear that he likely naturally stores the blade within the scabbard of his mind*, Oiva grasped. *And, I can tell that this person isn’t someone living for violence but for military power. He is endowed with power controlled by rules to a certain degree... In other words, he is a soldier.*

A soldier. It is a ridiculous story if you go by his age, but Oiva, conceited about his own power of observation, sees a mental image of a capable man. It is a gift he polished because of the iron and the flame of a smithy. *Even if it’s not needed for a person surviving the ordinary everyday’s life, there is no need to easily misread it as suitable for a person surviving in the gambling room. That young boy has a remarkable character. He might have merits and demerits, but at least this much I can say without doubt.*

Just, ‘dearly missed sound’? I wonder what he means by that? As far as Oiva knows, the sound resounding in this dojo isn’t the one commonly heard on a parade ground either. It is a sound of rhythmical and continuous clear striking unique to the bamboo-bundled sword.

“Has the training with bamboo-bundled swords become popular?” (Oiva)

“Eh?” (Marko)

“As far as I know it is a refined tone which shouldn’t be used by anyone but the volunteer army.” (Oiva)

“A-Ah, I guess that’s how it is... Yea, I don’t think there is anyone else using it.”

(Marko)

He was confused to be asked in reverse although he expected the question. For some reason it looks like that fearsome young boy knows about the volunteer army. I wonder if his parents joined the campaign? Since I have heard that the volunteer army broke up before the "Sacred Flame Festival," it is a likely story that those who returned to their home towns are exercising with bamboo-bundled swords.

The boy bent his head slightly to one side. It was possible to throw a fleeting glance at the slenderness of his neck.

"Are there still some people originally belonging to the volunteer army?"

(Marko)

"That is..." (Oiva)

As he started to answer, a scream as if tearing up silk was raised. When it was unnaturally interrupted, Oiva couldn't help but have a bad premonition. Such things like kidnapping aren't unusual. As the surface of society is passionately in the middle of restoration, the underside of society can't erase the violent nature from the time of war.

"Excuse me." (Marko)

"Eh, ah, oi!?" (Oiva)

Even if he has time, the young boy dashed at full speed out as soon as he turned is back. Merely catching a glimpse of his facial expression, it was filled with disgust. *He might have some knowledge about it? What's the deal with him? Oiva ponders. I'm not inexperienced to the degree of thrusting my head in each and every trouble of this sort. It is also troublesome if you are targeted by the likes of such groups. But, after having exchanged words, it is unpleasant to overlook a person that piqued my interest. I guess all the more if it is an unusually remarkable character.*

He looks by accident at the men striking each other as group. They are in an intense ecstasy. They haven't noticed the incident at the entrance at all. They probably haven't even realized that there was a young boy here. He would be the same if it was himself exchanging blows. Later it would finish with only taking a tiny space within their conversations that there apparently was a kidnapping in

the neighborhood.

“This is also just because of that guy. Yea, if that’s the reason, it can’t be helped. It can’t be helped.” (Oiva)

Picking up one wooden long sword you could even call very thick and also unintentionally being struck with an idea, Oiva also took a somewhat smallish, thin wooden sword and began to run in order to chase after the young boy.

Chapter 4: The trick is the coordination of the wrist and the fingers

Before long Oiva caught up to him. The young boy, stopping in the middle of a dark alley, is showing a difficult facial expression knitting his eyebrows. *It became troublesome, eh?* Oiva judged.

“Ok, what happened? Do you have something that could help?” (Oiva)

“You are the one from before...” (Marko)

His face shows complete surprise. It means he didn't expect adults to help him. I guess that's only natural for this young boy, Oiva can agree with that. He isn't a normal child after all.

“It's Oiva. I heard the scream of a woman just now, was it a companion of yours?” (Oiva)

“... I'm Marko. It looks like the woman, who came with me from the village, was kidnapped. No one in the vicinity told me anything about it even if they heard something. Do you have some clue, sir?” (Marko)

“That person, once again...” (Oiva)

Oiva clicked his tongue within his mind when he heard that they came from a village. It is unexpected for him considering the young boy's outfit. *In that case it's quite bad. If it's people from this town, it will be possible to have the soldiers at the police substation get involved. By doing so it usually gets resolved somehow. However, for outsiders... and in addition to that, villagers, it will become a nuisance. Their treatment by the administration is rather crude. Furthermore it looks like the criminal is a man who has backing. If it was a standalone crime, the guys of the back streets, starving for some pleasure, would likely openly show their curiosity. The people in the surroundings don't want to get involved in such incident and are ignoring the boy. In other words both judged it to be too troublesome to get involved with it...* Oiva interpreted it this manner.

“May I also hear the circumstances? Those will also alter the direction we

move and how we resolve it.” (Oiva)

“Understood.” (Marko)

As far as I understood it, the boy’s group apparently came here for business transactions from a village in the borderland. There are 3 of them, a man for carrying the luggage, the boy and a young woman as chaperon of the boy. Her name is Hanna. It appears to be the woman who was kidnapped. The party reserved a cheap inn in the outskirts to have a bed for tonight. The boy, being lured by the sounds of the dojo, went out, but the woman, being worried that he might be hurt, apparently chased after him.

“Although she was told to not follow me since I would return soon...” (Marko)

“Then you are to blame. If she is poking her nose into your business out of anxiety, then you basically don’t have her trust. The words of a guy that can’t be trusted are taken lightly. Furthermore, for a woman, I guess? She has feelings. So she will also follow you.” (Oiva)

“... I didn’t consider it properly.” (Marko)

For an instant his eyebrows twitched, but he doesn’t let such things like regret and impatience to be seen in his expression. Rather it is a grim expression. A premonition of anger can be sensed within that small body. For Oiva this is a strange display. *He doesn’t behave as if he is worried about his female guardian.*

“However, you travelled quite the distance. This ain’t the nearest town, you know?” (Oiva)

“It is related to the market price for the trade. The business itself was concluded successfully.” (Marko)

“Can you also tell me about this business partner of yours?” (Oiva)

“It’s the Mountain Wind Company. We also brought a letter of introduction from a peddler along.” (Marko)

“Hmm...” (Oiva)

Oiva knew the name of that company as well. It is a store doing proper business. They don’t do such things as scheming to cheat rare customers from remote regions behind closed doors. In this case it means that it’s a non-

premeditated crime.

(Have the town's people seen her getting snatched, I wonder? When it comes to targeting young women...) (Oiva)

When he also considered the place in addition, there were only two possibilities remaining in Oiva's mind. *The first is a person among the nobles in their mansion in this town. It is a baron known for his lewdness. Since I hear that he has a liking in plucking wild flowers, it isn't weird for him to try sampling a village girl if he happens to see her walking the streets at night defenselessly. The other one is the boss who controls the gangsters in this area. As they are a gang meddling in slave trading, they will do it. I guess someone like a village girl with no connection in the town is an easy prey.*

"I've got a few ideas." (Oiva)

"I won't reveal it to anyone. I will even reward you. Would you tell me?"
(Marko)

He hasn't a mind of depending on others, clearly to the degree of that itself being refreshing. It is normal to think that there is no way for a child to deal with a criminal, no matter what kind of person they are, by himself. But, Oiva thinks, maybe if it's that young boy, it might be possible to somehow put an end to it.

(I want to see it. This thought might be reckless after all, but... it seems interesting.) (Oiva)

Oiva returned his sight to the broadly smiling boy with his blue eyes directly looking up to him.

"If it's a bastard that has the determination to kidnap a village girl traveling the streets at night without caring if he is seen, then there are 2 in this neighborhood. Of the previously mentioned, there is only the whiny Birappo and Bertrand (*T/N: >> Berutoran <<*), who is a former Eberian mercenary. Bertrand does various bad things and the gangsters of this neighborhood obey him."
(Oiva)

"Do you know where I can find them?" (Marko)

Since he asks without taking any time, it seems that tonight will become considerably flashy.

“Of course. There is a bar they are using as hang-out. I will guide you there.”
(Oiva)

“... Is that alright with you?” (Marko)

“Eh?” (Oiva)

“I’m very thankful for your help, but won’t it become troublesome for you?”
(Marko)

Even while he shows consideration, the young boy’s eyes are possessing a light as if a chilling glimmer dwells within them. I haven’t misjudged him after all. This young boy is concealing something terrible. And I have no doubt that this will manifest in this troublesome situation tonight... Oiva sensed his nostrils spread widely.

“That’s just fine, right!? I don’t know how many gangsters have gathered there. That reminds me that I’m linked by fate with that asshole, Bertrand.”
(Oiva)

“Are you acquainted with that boss character?” (Marko)

“He was there at that day the moment the hero was killed.” (Oiva)

“That battlefield, huh?” (Marko)

“Ah. There ain’t no need to worry about this matter. I’m a man who even survived that place of death. In a certain sense I’m stronger than the hero!”
(Oiva)

I have ended up talking about this matter in exaggeration which is out of character for me. Oiva felt embarrassed right away. The young boy can’t help but show a considerably astonished face. Even while stuttering such things as 「No, well...」 and 「Well then, let’s go?」, Oiva showed a small amount of pride. That’s why he didn’t realize. He completely failed to hear it, he failed to notice it.

“Didn’t you lose spirit due to that? ... I heard it was something wonderful.”
(Marko)

It wasn’t visible to anyone, that smile like a crescent moon in its last quarter. Blue flames leaked out. That is the acknowledgment given by the carved seal. On this day, in this night, Oiva Otara was marked down by the black-haired, blue-

eyed boy. Whether this is a blessing or a curse might depend on the differing judgment of the people.

At the time to come when Marko will be well-known for his prestige of possessing military strength across the entire continent, the name Oiva Otara is going to be identified as the sole veteran general. He will have many nicknames such as brave leader with fortitude, the impregnable general, tenacious mountain and so on. He will become known as a man that kept standing in the places where the most severe of battles rage on. He will have a preference for bloody battles.

Whether the person himself desired this or not will also become an aspect dividing the opinions. However, the only thing that is quite certain, is his opportunity of meeting Marko that night in early winter.

Now let's return to the main subject.

Without noticing the blue light looking at himself with fiery eyes from the back, Oiva ran on the street. The town is already dominated by the night. Apart from the main street, the back streets are covered in darkness full of places where one's line of sight doesn't reach. The people living in the tenement houses are also frugal with the little amount of fuel they have. Their appearances have somewhat become timid and they smell of mold.

The root is also the same for the bar they reached before long. It is exposed to the night air without even concealing the wild atmosphere. It feels as if that store's appearance is shadowed by an impression of desperation. The man, standing at the store's front, isn't a customer puller. Looking with a fleeting glance at the sword affixed to the waist of the man, Oiva silently put his breath in order.

"Who are ya? ... If ya didn't come to sell that brat, get lost." (Man)

Even while showing a slight faltering due to Oiva's stature, the man threatened him like this. *His character is bad, but even so it's his work, I guess.* Oiva, who tried to answer, was held back by a hand and Marko made a single step to the front.

"Please lead me to the place of your boss. I want to talk to him regarding the kidnapping of a woman." (Marko)

"... Aa?" (Man)

“It is pointless to hold a conversation with a stooge who doesn’t understand and doesn’t listen. Let us pass.” (Oiva)

“Uo, oi, you bastard.” (Man)

Marko avoided the extended arm and went inside. *Fast.* The man had his arms bound behind his back. Even while Oiva is surprised of this defensive body movement, he followed Marko. *Let’s see if the store interior is as wild as its outward appearance.* The ten-odd ill-bred men and the several women, apparently serving the customers, forwarded their attention to the newcomers causing the hustle and bustle of merrymaking to suddenly stagnate and quiet down. Although they realize the situation as well, they are plainly pretending as if they don’t, while standing on tip-toes stretching their backs. They are observing Marko.

“Please call your boss. I’d like to speak with him about the kidnapping of a woman.” (Marko)

He emits a voice as if clearing away the mist of liquor smell. The entire common surroundings had blank expressions. And then these warped into an explosion of laughter. A barrage of vulgar words is tossed at him. Even the man, carried by Oiva, laughed spitting saliva once again.

“Are ya some prince-sama comin’ to reform the world?”

A drunken man tried to grab Marko’s nape of the neck, he ended up missing. *On the contrary, he has already proceeded several steps into the store. Someone stood up and tried to obstruct his advance. Even so, it isn’t in time. Fast. He swiftly and quietly goes towards the stairs leading inside.*

“Oi, you. Hey, wait!”

Most likely the boss, Bertrand, is at the second floor. Oiva concluded this at that point. *The two men, standing in front of the stairs, have the best physique amongst the men in this place. Even their attires are good. The swords, they placed within reach, have a look of being used for a long time. I guess they are guards. Those two, having picked that place, told Marko that Bertrand was past the stairs.’*

“Ugya!?” “Gowa!?”

Without having the time to draw their swords, those two screamed. Scattering blood from their faces, they are staggering. In that gap, Marko swiftly ascended the stairs.

(What! What did happen!? Didn't he just walk!?) (Oiva)

He tried to follow him in a hurry, but as expected the two giants wouldn't let a second intruder pass by. He is surrounded promptly, but even including Oiva himself, no one does anything since they are somehow bewildered. They aren't able to process the strange thing, that happened in front of their eyes, in their minds.

"F-For now... let's go with this!" (Oiva)

Oiva swings the man, he was carrying, abusing him as a pole. This was the second strange occurrence tonight for all but Oiva. A human isn't that light. *Are they overawed by the intensity of raising a sough similar to the buzzing of a whip?* Oiva finally arrived at the stairs without without even needing to fight.

"Since we are just going to talk, don't follow us, ok? Here you go!" (Oiva)

At the top of the stairs, the man... with a messy, muddled face unknown whether by tears or drool, was thrown down at the completely exhausted people. This caused consecutive sounds of things crushing, angry voices and screams.

"Thank you very much. Please continue to treat him well there." (Oiva)

It is Marko. Looking at him, he faces off someone at the other side of a table pretending to not see the close-by Oiva. With nothing but a single light on top of the desk, it is a lot gloomier than downstairs. Bertrand sits in front of the swaying, orange-colored light. His finely chiseled, manly features are bordering to wildness with his hair and beard growing as they please. Both sides' brows are wrinkled as if curdling. The sluggish pupils are hollow due to alcohol.

(Bertrand of the Green Cloth... As usual he is making a face as if just about everything is amusing.) (Oiva)

Oiva is a several-times acquaintance of Bertrand. *Although I faced his good-for-nothing face at all our meetings, the worst one amongst all our encounters was the first after all, I guess. The time was 7 years before now. The place was the boundary between the Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire, the Plain of*

Wandering Calamity. The location where the Asuria Kingdom's side slowly deviated. It was in the vicinity of the place where the hero died in battle as is known nowadays.

Like this we met as fellow soldiers of opposing military camps.

Oiva as the blacksmith specialist of the campaign's army directly under the hero. Bertrand as a mercenary, hired by the Eberia Empire army, trying to destroy them. At first the situation was hell for Oiva. But, after General Salomon's support, it changed into hell for Bertrand. With the death god continuing to swing its scythe at the plain of death, the two crossed their swords.

At first it looked like Oiva would be killed beneath Bertrand's sword. In the end it looked like Bertrand would be killed beneath Oiva's sword. Without settling it, it ended with both barely keeping their lives within the chaotic battle.

"A tossed coin? ... It's the second time I see this." (Bertrand)

Oiva was startled by the heavily spoken words of Bertrand. While kicking a man trying to come upstairs and having him fall, he watches Bertrand. His right hand is wet with alcohol and fragments of ceramics are sticking in it. *I guess he has tried to throw a sake bottle or a sake cup at Marko but was intercepted before he could do it, huh?*

(Tossing a coin... I see, kurautsuwa, eh?) (Oiva)

Kurautsuwa is the general term for hidden weapons, secret possessions and weapons used to take someone by surprise (*T/N: Shurikens for example, in western civilization it would be a fake arm with a spring-up knife*). Oiva knew about the utility of using such things as tiny swords and iron needles. However, a coin is unexpected. Alongside solving the riddle of the guards being repelled earlier, he recalls the laceration on the forehead of the man he had kicked to make him fall. He was surprised by the power of a small child throwing it.

"I'm going to ask only one more time. Did your henchmen kidnap a village girl this evening?" (Marko)

He has calm voice. However, every single word is carrying a cold-hearted declaration of war. Mysteriously the sounds of battle are embedded into the child's voice. Oiva already didn't consider it to be strange.

(Although I ain't gonna see anything but his back from now on, undoubtedly for his eyes it is different, it is different.) (Oiva)

He will probably get angry if I told him that I came here just to see this. While thinking about such matters, Oiva continues to create an avalanche of people by repeatedly sending them flying with a kick. *It already doesn't suffice as threat for the crowd below. However, since it is an irritating situation, isn't it more preferable to destroy the stairs?* At the time he was struck with an idea, that sound reached his ears.

“A... ua... impossible...” (Bertrand)

It is Bertrand's voice. I see. But, is that really Bertrand? His eyes, nostrils and mouth are opened widely in an unsightly way. Possibly even the ear holes? He is reaching out both his trembling hands in order to use them for embracing himself, and yet his hip uselessly gives way.

It is an unbecoming appearance for the swordsman Bertrand, a merchant known for his remarkable ability. It's even impossible for the gangster boss, Bertrand. It's a Bertrand unknown by anyone... but, for Oiva it is a Bertrand he recognises. At that place of death... at that unique inescapable situation where everyone was exposed to the wind of death... this is for sure the Bertrand he saw at the end.

As he already gasped for breath, that man's mouth recited four sounds. Then he became silent. There wasn't even anything transmitted through the air. Therefore Oiva didn't hear it. He wasn't able to see it.

What did you see, Bertrand? And, what did you say? Oiva doesn't understand. The four sounds revealed the name of a person.

Chapter 5: It's good if you talk obediently

The distance between swords is the distance to death.

A single man continued straightforwardly in his pursuit of the sword's distance within the melee combat. Without caring about the sight of knights riding their horses and without pursuing the soldiers holding their spears at the ready in lines, anything and everything was unrelated to him, even the stone arrows. He killed men. He killed horses. He split apart earthen walls as well as armours. That head, covered in a green hood, desired to sweep over the battlefield with his sword style.

The man called Bertrand had such history of smashing a single battlefield to very small pieces. It is a story of seven years ago.

(Although he is called something like a hero, he is nothing but a single human. Straddling his white horse, donning his golden and silver armour and being in the centre of his own troops... there is no reason for him to escape my sword. Let's prove that he is merely a bag of flesh filled with blood.) (Bertrand)

Foolishly separating from his army, he tore into the army of the Eberia Empire like a ferocious maniac. The oily flesh and blood of countless soldiers was littering the soil. Renowned nobles and commanders were exposed beneath the sky in equal tragedy. Their defeated officers and men had passed away in a similar manner. The equality of life was realized under the sword's blade in the chaotic melee combat. It was Bertrand whose emerald green clearly stood out in the increasing moisture over there.

It was a single giant that stopped that sword which had murdered 20-30. That person didn't even wear a proper armor. Wielding the lance, he undoubtedly picked up somewhere, like a club, he became a storm within the dirty mud of death. With the outcome already having been determined, it was a situation of how he would be annihilated. No one would approach such plain hazard. And yet, although there were the easy, high-priced necks of nobles right close-by, why go for the neck of such an ordinary soldier?

Only Bertrand attacked him. He was a phenomenon that valued the impartiality of death. It was because he was someone that didn't one-sidedly chose high or

low ranks, men or women and young or old. There was absolutely no reason to avoid the giant in front of him. Clashing the sword with the iron hilt, it turned into an one-on-one for a brief time.

(Death can only be compensated with dying accordingly. If you face someone holding a sword, it will result in either you or your opponent meeting death. Encountering death. By making sure to meet death everyday, it is the raw and genuine existence of death I worship as god.) (Bertrand)

While having an unexpected hard time to handle the level of resistance of the giant, Bertrand experienced a sudden change in the progress of the battle. First, miserably tattered friendly soldiers came rushing in. It was a large mass of them. Those were injured soldiers and the regiment of heavy wagons placed in the vicinity of the rear of the formed encirclement. Next, a rain of arrows and stones came down to the degree of changing the sky's colour. And then a cavalry, whom you ought to admire for their level of refinement, charged in.

With tenacious sharpness, it was a storm of an assault doing as it pleased. Repeatedly merging into detachments of ever-changing large and small units, it was a thorough tactic of dividing the Eberia Empire's officers and soldiers into units of a hundred and annihilating each of them. They were completely different from the empire's army that swooped down on the hero lured by the greed of man. In all respects it was rational, efficient and inhuman... it was the creation of death as if being the logical conclusion of a methodology for the sake of destroying a large army completely.

The dreadful thing was that this methodology didn't take into account the rescuing of the troops, led by the hero, within itself. Rather it was applied in order to create a gap on the enemy forces with confusion and unpreparedness. The Eberia soldiers in the rear without any fighting spirit left, the Eberia soldiers at the front cut off from their triumph and the hero and his followers suffering a dilemma... those three kinds of forces were densely crowded into one pack, without any of them being able to do anything about it, and butchered from the brink.

(That is certainly... that is certainly the incarnation of death. And the person conducting those deaths is...) (Bertrand)

Bertrand saw him. Sidestepping the sword of the distracted giant, he defeated him in reverse. While stained in excreta, spinal fluids, oily flesh and blood, he

escaped at that time using the corpses, uncertain whether friend or foes, as shield. Commanding the troops as if being an avatar of death, it was a man murdering ten thousands as the herald of death. Without intending for anyone to survive and without even ceasing, he calmly created a mass of death while not indulging himself in it... It was the advent of a god of death.

In the end not a single imperial soldier from Eberia was forgiven. Without even accepting surrender, they were slaughtered... actually, the nobles and officers were killed without any being spared... of the common soldiers and mercenaries mere several hundreds survived and were all together turned into slaves. Bertrand also was one amongst them. Bound by chains, he was traded as manpower.

And he knew. About the mad ritual of the flame... the "Sacred Flame Festival." For the Eberia Empire he is the god of death. For the Asuria Kingdom he should have been a saviour. But the consensus in the kingdom was him not being satisfied, and therefore having killed in mere cold-bloodedness. His body was humiliated, his name was disgraced and in the end he was accused of blasphemy. Bertrand didn't deem this as insanity. Rather, he consented to it with *It stands to reason*.

Such is "death!" Being shunned, being feared and being burned at the stake! Humans are born while crying. They cry as soon as signs of death start to appear. The civilization is built up in the desire to repel and avoid this end once they realize its approach. Death is the driving force. They try to push it away since "Death" is the biggest uncertainty for man. They suppress the thing called death cowardly in the name of wisdom. They wish to turn away their eyes from the truth through deception.

Bertrand was convinced and he arrived at that belief.

He wore the shape of an incarnation of "Death" after all.

He was a man, who searched for god by the sword's distance on the battleground, but he was able to clearly see the shape of his belief's target of worship. The day of the festival enshrining the hero and killing Salomon was the day of revelation showing his god to him. It was the establishment of a religion even if it was just him.

(After god concealed himself in a temporary form, he will once again decide to

show that form. If possible... If possible!) (Bertrand)

Bertrand escaped into the underworld after killing his master as a slave. He didn't consider in the slightest to return to Eberia either. He continued to impatiently wait, breathing the violence on the streets and desiring the next revelation as a devout believer.

(Lukewarm. The world has become lukewarm. It is fine to give praises to the hero. It is also fine to shed tears, I guess. However, there is something called a limit even in getting carried away. Are you starting to forget the terror of my god? Why don't you abuse any longer? Why don't you become more sacrilegious? Do you plan to sink into thorough stupidity, oblivion? You are like cattle, coveting in indolence and growing fat while swelling!) (Bertrand)

He became interested in slave trafficking after that. He wanted to see the person he is bearing in mind. He sells out the hunted livestock while gathering funds... buying people who witnessed the deeds of god. The soldiers of Eberia, who survived that hell and became slaves.

They, who were scattered all across Asuria Kingdom, with not few of them already having passed away. Even if he found them, it wasn't necessarily limited to those who were in awe regarding that god. And yet, he searched and gathered them, leaving the selected few close-by. Although he even lost interest in that before he noticed... however, there also was an interesting encounter. It was the giant. He was trading behind the scenes for the sake of raising funds. Before long, without even intending for it, he once again met a certain person. He always made a bored-looking face.

(That giant is also one of those who experienced that battlefield. Although it is fate, it is something trifle far off from a revelation.) (Bertrand)

Bertrand's drinking capacity kept increasing. He fell and piled up irritation and resentment like dregs. Time was transient. Even while being angry about the tepidness, Bertrand existed while being swallowed by the large river called everyday's life of the masses.

This time lasted until tonight.

"Salo... mon..." (Bertrand)



As if naturally calling out he muttered these words. Bertrand came back to the reality in front of him. On the second floor of the gloomy bar. He is one amongst the garbage rotting in this society in great numbers. A single boy is standing there.

(What... what eyes he has. Those are... those eyes are... completely like that time... that!) (Bertrand)

The votive light, dangerously reflected in those two pupils, is blue. His view, dulled by drunkenness, is painful due to the serenity. And yet he can't look at anything else. Nothing but the blue light is being reflected. *I'm afraid*, Bertrand thought. *I'm glad*, Bertrand thought as well. Even other various thoughts accumulated... once he noticed, he fell to his knees and looked up at the blue eyes. There were droplets of tears tracing down his face.

This was worship towards god.

Bertrand. That name will never appear in the military history Marko will go through. Even in the war chronicles of the Eberia Empire, 「Bertrand of the Green Cloth」 is considered to be killed in action during the war of subjugating “Asuria's” hero. His existence was never admitted to history. The name of the god of his faith hasn't been passed down.

However, something like written text, impertinently putting together the infinite upheavals, is nothing but scraps of the truth after all. Understanding something without apparently comprehending it, classifying something without sorting it out and reducing something without splitting it up, such conduct is no more than concluding that the sea holds a single drop of water. The faith's figure was definitely there. He was the sole apostle offering his reverence to death. He received a revelation at that inescapable situation, a righteous purification ceremony of resentment, by a man blessed with blue eyes.

And this hidden existence will support Marko from the shadows in his exploits. Bertrand, for the people who found out about him, he will act in secret without ever appearing on the surface of history. Offering his respect to “death” absolutely reigning over the good and evil of nirvana, he will follow the commands of Marko, death's incarnation... as a religious fanatic.

Well then, even as he is dreadful, at that time Marko is but a 6 years old boy. For Oiva, being an adult who had seen Marko's appearance, the sudden change in attitude shown by Bertrand was something he neither could deal with nor comprehend... Facing him, who was even exceeding the manners of a retainer, Marko told him without even the slightest agitation,

“That attitude is about right.” (Marko)

Bertrand was struck with awe due to the told words. His current self was exposing his unsightly carelessness. He admitted that this was something unforgivable. Even while being overcome with emotions, he kept holding down

the desire of screaming within his trembling chest and just humbled himself in front of Marko.

“Hurry up, you should answer. Did you kidnap a woman in this town tonight or didn’t you?” (Marko)

“Ha! No. I... it’s nothing I am aware of. The gang, being in town tonight, is the people drinking on the first floor. The other people... are those raising their skills and those being in charge of slave trafficking. Currently they are staying at the territory’s capital city.” (Bertrand) *(T/N: Formal speech)*

“Why?” (Marko)

“Ha! They are there because a large slave market will be held in the territory’s capital city soon.” (Bertrand)

Slaves are high-priced goods. There won’t even be any dealings done without gold coins. There are small and large gold coins circulating in Asuria Kingdom. The price for a typical labor slave is around 15 small gold coins. If you were to pay in nickel coins, that would be equivalent to 1500 coins. It will be 10 times the number if you use bronze coins. There are also sky-rocketing prices on the market. You will have to use several large gold coins for the highest grade slaves. 1 large coin is equivalent to 100 smaller coins.

On the other hand, going by the fact that they are also goods suffering from maintenance costs, the slave market is never a permanent exhibit and it is only held at urban areas where the rich live. With there only being one other large town besides the territory’s capital city within the Helrevi domain, it is only opened once at the beginning of winter in the town Bertrand decided to be his stronghold. There are countless people failing to pay the tributes afterwards. Concerning Bertrand’s search for remnants of the defeated Eberian army at that fated inescapable situation, it should be important to have a permanent market. Things like new goods are no more than goods used to earn an income through the profit margin of selling and buying. They are at various locations... with many divergences, such as from feeding grounds of wild animals up to the bedrooms of nobles, but no matter where they are, they probably have been already abused and thus they flow to the market as slaves once again. There Bertrand can find the slaves he is looking for. The irregularly held large market in the

territory's capital city always trades with slaves. Finding those slaves there is easy.

However, these circumstances had no relation to the boy.

"If that's the case, I don't have any business with you any more either."
(Marko)

For an instant being mentally slow, as Marko turned on his heels and left, Bertrand chased desperately after him with a roar immediately following.

"P-Please wait! Oh please... please wait for me!" (Bertrand)

With a weeping voice he frantically calls out towards the boy who looked over his shoulder with nothing but his cheek. Bertrand knew that he is a miracle that is hard to find. He doesn't worry about his reputation. In the first place, even disgrace is of no concern in regards to that visible world. With a state of clinging to the heels of the boy, who doesn't even reach up to his own waist, he begged.

"I have a clue! If it's someone who can kidnap a woman in this town tonight without getting the soldiers involved, there is only one person!" (Bertrand)

"Is it a baron from somewhere?" (Marko)

"Oh! That's right. However, you won't be able to locate the woman concerned at the baron in question. That's because that person has vacated the mansion with the goal to attend the large market at the territory's capital city as well."
(Bertrand)

"... His retainer, huh?" (Marko)

"Oh, oh! Right! You are absolutely right! If this is the case, it will be a situation caused by the shadows behind the scenes. If possible, I intend to support your honourable intention there, master... I beg you, please give this foolish me your divine command... I beg you." (Bertrand)

Being called master, did I attract his affection to the degree of requesting me to order him... the boy turned around. Even while restraining the current furious light in his eyes, there was "death" deep inside them without change. He answers.

“Can you do it?” (Marko)

“Ha! It is impossible to do trade without the flow of money or goods. Evil knows evil. Those bad people aren’t working alone.” (Bertrand)

“In what way?” (Marko)

“Ha! The fox will be caught in the tiger’s trap.” (Bertrand)

Marko slightly raised his eyebrows above his blue eyes. That was the proof that he got it.

“Then, I command you. Rescue the woman, Hannah, from Kikomaru, that was kidnapped in this town tonight.” (Marko)

It became a faith. The delight began.

“I shall follow master’s heart’s desires... !” (Bertrand)

He rose as swordsman dedicated to death tying his green cloth. From the upper floor, that has become oddly quiet, the instructions soar to the gathered gang. “Disperse and run in the night of the town in groups of two or three. Not only the drinking men, the women will go as well.” The spirit lacking any hesitation from Bertrand was transmitted to the remaining gangsters and they left quickly except the two skilled ones.

As the gang vanished from within the bar, only 2, Marko and Oiva, have remained.

“What? Why?... What-has-happened??” (Oiva)

Facing Marko and moreover asking him at last after a short time, the answer was a childish smile.

“There are this kind of people in the world as well.” (Marko)

Tossing away the wooden sword, he held in his hand, the giant grandly shouted “Like that could be the reason!”

Chapter 6: It's the twisting of good and evil because of a strange coincidence

They got the verification without difficulty. As expected, a carriage, branded with the crest of the Baron household, has been sighted on the road. It has already returned to the mansion. They even took the evidence from the actual abduction site. There isn't anyone who wants to make an enemy out of a noble, but that's only natural if one takes the immediate danger of their life more serious than distant concerns. Bertrand's lips warped.

"Shit... how foolish." (Bertrand)

Were these words aimed at anyone? Bertrand stood in front of the gate of the Baron's mansion. He is alone. There hasn't passed a lot of time since he requested to be allowed inside. Footsteps, as if being in a rush, approached. The eyes of an elderly man peeked at him through the wood flap serving as peeping hole.

"What's your business? It is bothersome if you come visiting despite not even having an invitation because it catches the public's attention." (Butler)

It's the butler of the Baron household. He is an acquaintance of Bertrand. His eyes have become bloodshot and he is even breathing roughly through the nose. It is a very great change from the composed expression Bertrand became familiar with. Without being shaken and enduring the nauseating strangeness, Bertrand softly clears his throat.

"What's so funny!?" (Butler)

The gap in your character, answering in his mind was all he could do. He laughs.



The association between this Baron household and Bertrand is, in its own way, deep. It is affected by the sexual preferences of the Baron himself. Although nobles, indulging in love affairs of different tastes, aren't rare, the Baron, in this case, is addicted to the eccentricity called 「Deflowering wild flowers」. Without

even turning his eyes on high-classed prostitutes or high society, he is eager to exclusively have sex with inexperienced women of unrefined commoner origin and below.

(It is unthinkable to argue the tendency of one's personal fetish, but his is unusually strange.) (Bertrand)

One day the talk about selling off slaves unexpectedly was dropped unto Bertrand by the Baron. As he checked the goods, it was ordinary village girls. Moreover he naturally didn't comprehend the matter of them being sold as slaves at all. In the end he inquired about the distance of their journeys and such simply showing a smile. Listening to the consonance of their innocence and shamelessness, their stories were something that caused Bertrand to crook the edges of his lips.

At daytime and night the Baron visited various places in cities and villages carefully seducing prey for himself. It wasn't by force. Just like a fated prince appearing in a tale... he showed dreams to naive girls, took them away while they blushed and had them enjoy themselves in an illusion without even knowing how many nights passed... eventually discarding them after tiring of them. After deceiving them, they were changed into slaves.

At the same time as he was thinking that it was something foolish, it also was of great interest for Bertrand. *Even though it would have been fine if they had continued to live with their feet grounded on the earth, a dream of personal fortune visited them unexpectedly. In the end, the ignorant women fell into anguish... In the process they eventually matured from being densely naive being far apart from death in all respects. They weren't as fragile to die out of shame.*

(Is that the thing called flexibility of wild flowers? Or is it something else? At any rate, it's their strength.)(Bertrand)

Also, he admired the Baron's eyes for one's character for only choosing such women. *It's worth to show respect, if someone's versed in any kind of obsession. Not all women are like this,* Bertrand is aware of that.

That mother is proof of that. That woman, born into a household of an Eberia Empire's noble, planning to elope with a minstrel, who visited the mansion, was sold to a brothel. At the time she was discovered, she held a single baby even in her visibly miserable state. She hanged herself without even leaving a will on the

night her relatives held a meeting. Afterwards the baby was brought up in an orphanage of the church... it has led to me keeping a sword.

(Slavery is the act of humans. It can be seen as related to one's character. For me it's a method to obtain money and I can also observe those on the verge of despair which is a sickness until their death. For the Baron it's not just the outlet of his sexual desire either, it's apparent that he is seeking something.)

(Bertrand)

While his closed mind is bound by the darkness of immoral sexual relationships, there might be something that connects both of us.



And currently, Bertrand is laughing. He cannot help laughing. The stifled laughter resounds from his throat.

“Shut up! Be silent! Hurry up and tell me your reason for being here or leave!”
(Butler)

The man, shouting without being able to separate from the peeping hole, was ridiculous. *It's fortunate that I'm physically shielded from his spit, eh? No, it's even more fortunate that I can't see his whole body,* Bertrand assents. *He hasn't a strong point of expressing himself without gestures or words to begin with.* Bringing the urge of bursting into laughter within his abdominal muscles under control, he tries to to speak as calm as possible.

“Reason and everything else... I just came to receive the disposal as usual.”
(Bertrand)

“W-What stupidity are you uttering... Baron-sama isn't here!” (Butler)

“That's right, no? Nevertheless, once the carriage moves, I come... because you are a frequent customer. Even if you don't call for me, I have at least the consideration to visit.” (Bertrand)

Bertrand slightly strengthened the glint in his eyes. The butler, who apparently tried to spit out many words, is flustered and making different faces upon that announcement without saying those words and before long quietly opened the door. Even as he once again felt nauseated seeing the butler's pride without him even being able to feign serenity, Bertrand got over it with nothing but a snort. He gives his sword into the custody of the gatekeeper.

“There are rats everywhere! They are skilled at sniffing out food!” (Butler)

“I agree. Though not all of them stop after devouring the food.” (Bertrand)

The way of cursing and chewing his words is the most laughable about him. The empty-handed swordsman kept floating a smile on his lips. I've seen the outfit of the butler, walking in front, often. Those are nice clothes but they are an allotment. The point is to distribute proper items if you look at it in regards to family status, huh? Concealing a thin body which doesn't know martial arts, he is displaying a suitable authority, but... it isn't able to hide his lingering unrest. Filth can't be paid off completely either. Is it compassion that you can't see the nether region?

“... This way. Won't you question them after you came so suddenly?” (Butler)

He is guided to the back without entering the mansion. If it's as always, I will interview the girls in a secluded room. And then, without speaking much, I will take them away. Everything happens under the supervision of the butler. It has never happened that the Baron made an appearance there. However, the business clearly takes place due to the Baron's intention.

Consequently, there is no one but the butler accompanying him.

Having been guided to a cellar, there was a woman crouching along the wall of the interior, which stank of mold and dust. She probably noticed the sound. She glares in the direction of Bertrand, who is tilting his head in contemplation. Her hair is disheveled and her face, showing traces of being hit, is stained in blood and tears. She appears to be shivering as well.

She was in a terrible condition. Her ankles and wrists are bound and a gag is forced into her mouth. As the manner of binding is rather excessively shitty, especially her hands are in a state of having a quite deteriorated blood circulation. Her clothes are torn and disordered all over. The woman repeatedly stirs bravely without even exposing her skin. Bertrand was relieved within his heart. *It seems I made it in time.*

“She was a stray woman with a wild temperament. With such temperament it won't do any good for her to have an audience with the Baron. Sell her. It's fine for you to take her away immediately.” (Butler)

Throwing a glance at the butler talking rapidly, he approached the woman. As she tries to act violently, he brings his mouth close to her ear and tells her in a tiny voice,

“Hannah from Kikomaru? I came to rescue you by the decree of your friend who is worried about your body. It’s a black-haired, blue-eyed friend, don’t you understand? If you get it, be obedient. In exchange I will save your life as well.”
(Bertrand)

The woman’s eyes hardened and opened in a perfect circle. Re-tightening the rope at the wrist after taking this as confirmation, he untied the rope at her ankles. Politely having her stand up, he supports her as she staggers and furthermore covers her in his own mantle. The butler, also seeing all of this, completely stared in wonder.

“S-Splendidly done... The minion has a minions’s technique, eh... ?” (Butler)

He seems to be deeply surprised by the circumstance of the woman obediently obeying. Bertrand swallows down the laughter within his throat.

(He is showing an unsophisticated, greedy face. In other words, it appears as if there is some of it within him. You are a race of people looking down on minions having been sheltered beneath the umbrella of authority... a low-life yearning for that authority while looking up to it. That’s your character.) (Bertrand)

“... Don’t get used to something of this level. You will be learning this the hard way after getting passed to a brothel.” (Butler)

Saying this over his shoulder, the butler, having become flustered, went outside the cellar. Hannah groans as if demanding to remove the gag, but Bertrand doesn’t answer that expectation.

(If it’s a villain, it will end here. But, if it’s a low-life, I have a feeling it will continue... look!) (Bertrand)

“W-Wait! You bastard, won’t you pay the money?” (Butler)

Grabbing at her from the side, he tried to catch Hannah’s shoulder with his fingers, which are similar to twigs of dry wood. Bertrand, loosing any kind of

hesitation, broke 1 amongst the 5 fingers. After a small amount of silence, a shrill scream echoed into the night sky. Seizing the chin of the butler, who was the source of the scream, Bertrand increases the grip strength while announcing,

“Your wicked indiscriminate act is unacceptable while your master isn’t here. Besides you made a mistake. You won’t obtain women and money any longer. Above having proof of your wickedness grasped by evil, your life from now on won’t have any other hue but misery. Despair. You, who planned to deceive your master, already aren’t under the protection of your master’s power. You were tested.” (Bertrand)

Bertrand took out a single parchment from within his pocket. He showed it in front of the eyes of the butler being stained with tears and drool. With the handwriting of the Baron and concluded with the seal of the Baron’s household, its contents overwhelmed the man, who was the butler. It’s a declaration stating that the butler is to be discharged if he made a sale during the time the Baron is absent from home.

“Misdeed and folly are different things. That’s the line at the end as postscript you have also failed to notice. Won’t you go greeting the new butler as ex-butler? It looks like you will be given severance payment.” (Bertrand)

Bertrand drags along the spasming, sobbing man. Even Hannah’s face, which was freed of the gag, turned pale. She followed without saying a single word in the time until they left the mansion.



“What did you tell Hannah, Bertrand?” (Marko)

Marko grumbled from atop his seat as 3 people sat at a table, illuminated by torchlight, eating food and drinking. Bertrand, sitting at the foot of the table, humbles himself and quietly sips a sake cup. Having 2 people of that kind on his left and right, Oiva raised his eyebrow in bafflement while gulping down a large amount of sake.

“Let alone doing your duty, your face is blushing. Your mind isn’t here. Your attitude towards me is strangely polite as well... your other followers are also cocking their heads in puzzlement.” (Marko)

“A leader hides his true intentions in regards to society. I have nothing else but admiration about your deep design and forethought.” (Bertrand)

As if hesitating to look straight into his eyes, Bertrand replies in a solemn manner while bowing in his seated position. Even while showing sympathy, the giant besides him doesn't pick a side. His eyebrows shaped in a 八 due to his bewilderment got even more steep.

“However, heeding his Highness' intentions, it won't do for a woman, attending to his everyday's needs, to show contempt. Without informing her about the truth, I will only change her attitude indirectly.” (Bertrand)

Having childish shaped hands, his fingers will probably control the truth, which he didn't reach with his previous death as ordinary person, but I will stay by the side of those closed blue eyes. Although his once again opened eyes are half-closed, his cheeks are expanding a little bit. He already has the dignity of being someone leading a cavalry of ten thousand... Bertrand thought.

“Hannah is, for better or worse, stubborn. It isn't likely that she will change her attitude and way of thinking quickly.” (Marko)

“Ha! It is exactly so. If pressed, she has an disobedient temperament towards authority which is unusual for someone without education. I will make sure to teach her about the benefactor who bestowed salvation to her poor life.” (Bertrand)

“... In short, you induced her to honour me by making use of the point that she fell in love with Bertrand?” (Marko)

“I haven't told her a single lie.” (Bertrand)

Like this, it isn't a lie. In Bertrand's view there are 2 blue moons shining brilliantly.

(My faith was already rewarded. I have obtained the delight to kneel at the feet of a person that controls death. There is no longer any need for me to freeze due to fumbling in a fog. Even my heart has willingly become peaceful leaving the darkness of avidya... Oh, my Lord!)* (Bertrand) (T/N: * in Buddhism it is commonly referenced as ignorance or misunderstanding, wiki it if you want to know more)

Putting down the sake cup with a thump, Oiva asks,

“I don’t understand the reason. Although I don’t understand it at all, is it that? Is it fine to say that Marko and Bertrand tied a pledge of lord and retainer? If that’s after the exchange with the tossed coin some time ago, has it been decided that I will be the witness?” (Oiva)

The very young boy sighs. The swordsman of the green cloth smiled in silence. The giant tried to follow both sides. First he sighed, next he smiled broadly and then he laughed loudly.

“How nice! A truth, that is in no way amusing, spread in this world. Even if you give birth to an absurd lord and retainer relationship not yet seen, it’s nice! It’s great! You have my blessing!!” (Oiva)

On that night where the cold wind of winter crisply mingles with the moonlight, with the people, leading a life of immorality, gathered in a room on the upper floor of the bar, 3 people laughed as they would walk through life together after that. Marko, Oiva Otara and Bertrand. The men bid farewell, each of them heading towards the place they should be at, positively advancing through time. At the time they once again meet up, the continent will probably listen to the beats of a fearsome battle group.

“There is one person I want you to look for.” (Marko)

Marko requested at the end. For Bertrand this is an absolute order. The details got his faithful heart excited. Vowing to achieve it even in exchange for his life, Bertrand will accomplish this task risking his life in fact.

“It’s a woman having a darkish skin with red eyes and silver hair. As you have guessed, she is descendant from the minority trying to live on the huge ice fields in the north. Her name is Jikil Rosa (*T/N: >> Jikiru roza <<*). She was affiliated with the volunteer army of the Asuria Kingdom’s military, but I think she has already left the military now.” (Marko)

Marko continued that she probably hasn’t gone to her northern home and furthermore added another thing,

“She worked as adjutant of Salomon Hahato... explaining it like this, it’s probably easy for you to understand? There is the possibility of her being

temporarily arrested by the church, but they should have safely released her. It might be good to follow her from there in order to trace her movements from the beginning.” (Marko)

Jikil of the Demon Eyes.

It’s the other name of the brave woman who dashed across the battlefield as Salomon’s right hand retainer.

Chapter 7: Herbivores, carnivores, a shepherd and me

The fragrance of flowers is drifting around gently caressing the cheeks. If you take a look, a sea of tulle flowers, being in full blossom in various shining colours such as pink, white and red, is forming partitions of weeds on the fences. That beauty makes you sense the vigour of spring and the signs of summer drawing near. As it had been a while since he saw such scenery, he unintentionally voiced it out.

“It’s a nice village. The land is brimming with energy.”

The youth, saying this while smiling, had a refined appearance riding on top of the horse’s back. However, underneath the blue cloak he wore armor and a sword was affixed to his hips. And, a long-handled spear was tied at the back of the saddle making his apprenticeship and ability as a military man apparent. The bearer is loaded with combat-like articles.

He moves while profoundly gazing at the scenery of the village. Several people ran in a hurry towards him. *I guess it’s the village headman and the others going by their attires.* The youth however, who made such an assumption, awaited the men without even dismounting from the horse.

“Having journeyed all the way here, please be welcome to Kikomaru. I’m the village headman, Herman.” (Herman)

“I see. I’m Akseli Anel (*T/N: Akseri Aneru*), First Lieutenant of Helrevi’s territorial army. Thanks for going as far as coming to meet me.” (Akseli)

Throwing discerning looks at each other, Akseli raised a voice of astonishment within his mind. *He is tough. The healthy body, albeit reaching the limits of being middle-aged, is indeed that of a farmer, but I can sense a tenaciousness that one ought to call the framework of the soul within the strong scent of soil. Is it maybe pride? Or is it rather conceit?’*

(A pioneering village from a period of wars has a strong core. They don’t have a spirit of independence.) (Akseli)

Even while praising them, he doesn’t breath a word about it. Akseli looked at the

village headman's group with a glare. Despite them being confused about his attitude of not dismounting no matter what, one of the villagers comes forward offering to take the horse's bit. Nodding generously, Akseli jolted the sword belt at his waist ostentatiously. With a clank it springs back into its previous state. The whole action is for the sake of observing the village men's reactions.

"... Will First Lieutenant-dono please join us at dinner this evening?" (Herman)

Even while the village headman's shoulder slightly stiffened, his eyes didn't show anything like trepidation or such. *I guess he has no knowledge of military arts going by they way of taking distance and the level of his center of gravity*, he is able to surmise. Even so, the point of his posture not breaking is as Akseli expected.

"I'm planning to stay for around 3 days to investigate the village. Although something like hospitality is unnecessary, I would be glad if you could serve me some sake." (Akseli)

"Well then, please allow me the favour of receiving you at my humble home. Will you require a guide?" (Herman)

"You have my thanks. As for the guide, I shall rely on you from tomorrow onwards. For today I have planned to have a look around with nothing but my own eyes. I will listen to village headman-dono's story after dinner." (Akseli)

As soon as he said this, Akseli nimbly dismounted. Entrusting the horse and his luggage to the villagers, he began to walk just as he had said he would. It's not like he will blame them for following him either. This investigation is a formal duty assigned by royalty.

The objective of Akseli, being dispatched by the territorial army, is to inspect Kikomaru which shows an odd growth. The village continues to fulfill the obligation of annual tribute payment... it's an investigation for the sake of finding the reason why only such small village is able to keep accomplishing this.

For around 2 years this place has been a large ice field with strong winds cutting through it. The cold-weather damage rampaged extensively in the northern part of the Asuria Kingdom. Dense miasma was mixed into the wind only weakening the capability of the soil to produce anything. As end result it caused even difficulties in procuring fodder as well as crop failure. Although the large-scaled

animal husbandry and the warhorses were preserved, small to medium villages were in a state of being unable to bring their livestock through the winter. The price for meat hit rock bottom temporarily just to continue rising steeply after that.

With the tribute payments falling, the flow of goods thinned and only the slave market thrived in richly colored prosperity. Predicting the frequent occurrence of robbery in the near future due to the deteriorating public order, Helrevi's territorial army reinforced the rapid reaction force. Actually even Akseli experienced hostilities with mounted bandits.

(It is the irony of a horse production area that even the bandit's horses are excellent. Their mobility is first-class.) (Akseli)

Akseli recalled his escort mission for a transport unit. *Inferring the situation of being pursued by bandits, we continued to guard against raids at night and day. We used the small amount of time before lunch to let loose a bit. I was surprised by the bandits being composed of nothing but light cavalry, but I was even more surprised by their high proficiency. Giving up as hopelessly difficult to destroy them as unit mainly comprised of infantry, we devoted ourselves to defence in order to protect the baggage, but... the result of that was me having my right to command an unit being revoked and being demoted to a leisurely post.*

(Cowardice... isn't it? If someone tells me that, I won't have any words to refute either. It's because of my indifference toward foolhardiness. And it's also a fact that I memorized the terror about the bandit's vigour's strength. It's deeply embedded. There are no words to retaliate about that.) (Akseli)

The extent of damage and even the situation of failing to subjugate the bandits afterwards didn't turn into a favorable wind for Akseli. The result of the battle still held some merit, but seeing that he was punished by the feudal lord once, it's unlikely they would praise him for it just being an accidental encounter. At least Akseli found it unimaginable that the feudal lord, Earl Mathias Helrevi, has such magnanimity and caliber.

In the end, the current state is him being a gofer with the duty of patrolling the borderland... an improper, unfortunate post if it's done by someone with the rank of First Lieutenant in the territorial army. However Akseli willingly fills the role. Rather he was even enjoying it.

“... Compared to the stagnating lake, there is only fresh wind and water streaming around here.” (Akseli)

There isn't a single deserted house within the village to be found. Every family is keeping a Cicero bird. It seems there are even dyed articles mixed amongst the laundry drying in the sun. Akseli was surprised seeing the appearance of the women... raising their hands as if to cover their mouths, their toes are smoothly put in order and their fingers haven't developed cracks either.

(The soil and the people, where does something abundant as this come from... ? I should definitely investigate this. There must be a reason for that. If I watch the people any longer, I might misread things. It doesn't look like they are hiding barns and farms anyway.) (Akseli)

The cheers of children could be heard from the other side, blocked by the buildings. Akseli, who went that way, stood stock still watching a scene he didn't anticipate there at all.

They were games and yet not a games.

Approximately 20 boys and girls are cheerfully playing separated into several groups, but the details of the games are different from any child play Akseli knows about. And yet they have a charm that ends up attracting her gaze either way. Akseli, who pondered about the reason it couldn't be called mere child's play, discovered the meaning and intention hidden within those games.

Certain children are enjoying themselves swinging a stick, but this isn't sword play. I guess it's most likely made out of wood. But anyway, a solid loop is hanging on the stick and they are competing by having it fly a distance. It appears they are free to swing the stick as they please, but there are many children swinging the stick from top to bottom for the sake of using the stick's own weight.

(There isn't any trick to that. In order to toss it far away, the skill is to figure out the speed of the stick's point... the stick's point, it is!?) (Akseli)

Akseli, who imagined himself doing it unintentionally recalled his own learning in sword art there. *A game of not winning with all one's strength... it's a game needed to get a knack for sword techniques. In fact the bigger children's way of swinging their sticks is sharp. They aren't thrown off by an unsteady posture like the one used in agriculture. They are swinging their arms and swords similar to a whip lowering their center of gravity. That is slashing,* Akseli concluded.

Also, there are certain children playing by chasing one another, but even so they are competing in an unknown way. Several of them separate in the same number at a time. They are mutually running in order to touch the back of their opponents. It's a game where a child, that has its back touched, drops out. In this case isolation means defeat. No matter what formation the team uses, the key to victory is to break the formation of the opponents. It had an aspect of strategy awakening their creative originality.

(Are they aiming to surround the left group by breaking through the central ranks? However, their opponents have also guessed this and are scattering. They are trying to get off the hook by gathering at another place. A single targeted person was surrounded, huh? However, with exception to that, they have reorganized... if you look at one person being a single unit, it's quite like a war. Even looking at the single state of one person, it is an excellent small-scale group battle.) (Akseli)

And last is the apparently youngest group. It looks like the remaining children, who have even difficulty in running, are humored by a single boy, but at the time he saw this, Akseli spontaneously raised a groan. No matter how many innocent limbs try to touch the boy while laughing and cackling... they crowded him with unforeseen movements and the clumsiness characteristic to very small children, but the boy is smoothly and elegantly avoiding them. With a paper-thin margin. The children, intending to touch him, mysteriously can't touch him. Laughing all the more, they extend their arms.

(There is absolutely no stiffness or hesitation in his movements. The position of his head doesn't move up and down either. It isn't at an average level of sliding one's feet. It appears as if he can see all the hands, even those in the rear.)

(Akseli)

While the small children seemingly raise their voices in happiness, they keep swarming the boy. They have become engrossed in trying to touch him. The boy also floats a smile. While dodging and turning around, they can't touch him at all. The boy's black hair is swaying and rustling. It's completely similar to the dancing of fairies and an angel... feeling this, Akseli fixed his eyes upon him.



“And, what kind of business does First Lieutenant-dono have with me?”
(Marko)

“No... it’s not to the degree of calling it a business.” (Akseli)

Akseli felt overpowered by the blue eyes straightforwardly gazing at him. In a place underneath a grove of trees with a carpet of flowers spreading, it was pleasant for two people to sit side-by-side.

(He doesn’t show any agitation at all toward a soldier who came here for making a round of inspection. Rather it’s me who has his hands somehow drenched in sweat. Although I don’t think that he is an ordinary person, you can say for sure he is a child with parts beyond that.) (Akseli)

It’s obvious that this boy is different from others. It’s not because of his neat personal appearance. It’s not because of him learning remarkable defensive body movement. It was the gaze of the boy which inevitably weighed on Akseli’s mind. Even though he has features to the degree of an angel, only his gaze is emitting an uncomfortable feeling of power.

(Without even a hint of something like the sweetness of a dream worn by a child, he doesn’t even have any capriciousness and resignation of a yielding person. He is completely the same as the mirror surface of a calm blue lake. It’s as if the darkness of avidya dwells in the depth of that gaze... can you say these are a person’s, to say nothing of a children’s eyes?) (Akseli)

Having a feeling to deeply and profoundly inhale, Akseli set his gaze free towards the fields. The Mekon wheat, sown in spring, is growing thickly and spreading emerald leaves. The wheat’s head hasn’t quite budded yet, but you can expect the harvest in fall by the vigorous waves of leaves swaying in the wind. It’s not a scenery you can observe in any kind of village either.

“I’ve heard that you... that Marko-kun is 8 years old, but what kind of place is this village in your eyes?” (Akseli)

Akseli said and frowned. *I definitely tried to connect my words since anything is fine, but nevertheless this isn’t much of a question, she thought. Although he is the village headman’s son, he is an 8 years old child. His gaze is certainly mysterious, but what commenting can he do towards the village which is his whole world as far as he is concerned? Since there is no sign of him knowing something like a place to compare with, he won’t debate whether the village is*

good or bad either.

“This is a nice village.” (Marko)

I asked a thoughtless question thus he could only answer in this way, Akseli contemplated, but the following words were something surpassing that his imagination.

“There is sturdy raised livestock. Look, the shepherd is visiting to see the state of affairs in a hurry.” (Marko)

Bitterly and bluntly saying this and even showing a smile, Akseli’s eyes opened widely. It’s only being himself that is reflected within the eyes of the boy. Even though he is about to comprehend the meaning, he isn’t able to answer anything right away. Recovering his breath, he also opens his mouth after swallowing down the saliva with a gulp. A big part of that came from his pride.

“... Livestock, eh? I wonder what kind of beast is the shepherd?” (Akseli)

“It seems to be a beast with with intellect and desire. Although only 10 years have passed since transferring the livestock, well... he is raising them fairly well. Although he is failing in the recent years.” (Marko)

“Failing... what happened?” (Akseli)

“It keeps taking place. Isn’t it because new beasts are invading his turf?” (Marko)

Akseli once again swallowed down his saliva with a gulp. It might be uncouth, but it was something he suppressed to the minimum. He corresponded to the level demonstrated by the boy... it was curiosity that gushed forth after barely keeping his personal dignity.

(The livestock is Kikomaru. The shepherd, who is a beast, is Earl Helrevi. This village has been under the territorial rule of the Earl for around 10 years before the time of the “Sacred Flame Festival.” And the new beasts are those mounted bandits, aren’t they? Interesting. Isn’t that boy, Marko, interesting? What kind of words will come out from his small mouth?) (Akseli)

There is a single divination Akseli knows of. It’s a something called a child divination. *At the time when an era stirs, there is something called an oracle seeing an omen within the silly singing and actions of children playing. It is considered that god will speak through their pure hearts. Am I not experiencing*

such miracle... ? Akseli was captured by the now inversely persuasive power of the uncomfortable feeling from before.

“I wonder if the old beast can’t win against the new beasts?” (Akseli)

“Yes. If its bleeding continues or possibly if a incredible replacement becomes the head, it might be possible.” (Marko)

“Why can’t it win?” (Akseli)

“It’s because it is looking ahead while making light of the flies.” (Marko)

“Can it win if it turns around?” (Akseli)

“If it intends to give them one foot as well.” (Marko)

“... Are they beasts of such degree?” (Akseli)

“The old beast’s body has fallen ill for no more than 2 years. It sheds blood. Smoke can be also seen in front. It’s in a state of not brandishing its fangs adequately.” (Marko)

Akseli groans to each and every point indicated obviously showing immediate results. *It turned into a feeling as if he is overlooking the whole area of the Helrevi earldom before I noticed. Being prudent even at the time I was leading an unit, I pretended to not see the faults of the territorial government...* he was thinking about that sitting in a corner of the village he had been relegated to.

“... I wonder what the sturdy livestock will do?” (Akseli)

Akseli had already partly forgotten about his duty at the time he asked this. Without the intonation of demanding an answer in his tone, he even had a presence as if he cut loose his anxiety instead. However, the boy’s reply again exceeded Akseli’s prediction.

“For the time being they would look for a pretext to invite the shepherd. Beyond fulfilling the obligation of paying a tribute, they have the right to be protected from wolves. Although their resolution will become somewhat constrained, well, please pay attention to protection and you should not forget that a pioneer village is acquainted sufficiently with pioneer villages, First

Lieutenant-dono” (Marko)

Akseli let out a laughter.

Chapter 8: Jestng while drinking alcohol is unrestricted

“No, it’s fine if you don’t humble yourself. I think that this is a good village.”
(Herman)

As the village headman, Herman, said this, Akseli’s mouth bent into a broad grin. The boy, Marko, produced a faint smile with a once again composed expression. After the dinner was over, small snacks and drinks were lined up on the table at the village headman’s home. 3 people with varied ages were equally illuminated by the orange light.

“I was allowed to examine it briefly, but the wheat fields are nice after all. At that rate the next annual tribute won’t prove any difficulties either. That’s excellent especially as there’s currently nothing but villages crying over the cold weather damage. Is there some secret to it?” (Akseli)

“There’s nothing to the degree of a secret... if I were forced to say something, it’s thanks to the insects living in the soil. This place is also close to the northern mountain range, thus it is easy for ashes and black soil to drift in. However, the insects living in the soil won’t even flinch to small quantities of miasma.”
(Herman)

The conversation is held between Akseli and Herman. Unless Akseli doesn’t especially bring up a subject, the black-haired, blue-eyed boy will only listen attentively in silence.

“I see. However, if it’s such kind of soil, I also hear that’s a property you can only achieve by making use of compost. If it’s this village, how are you maintaining this much livestock then? In the recent years many villages haven’t been able to procure feed for their cattle.” (Akseli)

“It’s not because our village brought all of its livestock through the winter. Is it the wind’s direction or the soil... ? The obtained pasture is also more or less important. Even now all the villagers are putting up with chewing on bread made of rough wheat.” (Herman)

“You state that it wasn’t easy. It would even be fine to take these words for their face value, but... how should I think about this? Although I’m not telling you to reveal everything, I shall tell you that deception won’t benefit this village.”
(Akseli)

Akseli used strong words, but as the matter of investigating the village was already a preliminary examination for taxation, he could understand their feelings of being afraid of tax increase if they bragged about their success crudely. Especially villages in remote regions have a mettle of 「We didn’t get any help from the king in pioneering this wilderness」. Even while accepting the rule, the tendency to shirk investigations and interventions is strong.

As far as Akseli can see, the reason for the abundance of Kikomaru is neither luck nor the location. Even if he took into consideration the matters concerning actual results, the impression he got within the village was that this village was obviously creating its abundance with its own reliable abilities. *But I somehow don’t understand. How do they do it?*

(I don’t know how they do it, but... the person, who brought this something into the village, is this boy, just that, I have no doubt about. Let’s see until how far I can get them to tell me about it.) (Akseli)

The boy, whose line of sight was nonchalantly directed ahead, pointed at a single small dish on the table without showing even the tiniest unrest. It’s something that uses finely cut root crops soaked in vinegar. Akseli didn’t eat it yet as it is something unfamiliar.

“First, try eating this please.” (Marko)

“Hmm... the slightly sour feeling, while chewing it, doesn’t taste bad. It has an unknown flavor.” (Akseli)

“It’s qwamp.” (Marko)

His words startled Akseli. *If it’s a soldier, they know its name as 「Horse feed on a prolonged battlefield」. This is a weed growing in the winter. It isn’t something you eat as food at the peak of spring. I will try to chew it once again. It isn’t something you can call delicious by any standard, but it wasn’t something so unappetizing you couldn’t eat either.* At that point the clear voice of a child can be heard.

“It is a bit more delicious if it’s still fresh, but since this was put into water to preserve it as pickled vegetable, around this much in taste is the best you can do. Because the estimated harvest per square meter is higher than Narukoma and Puck grass, it served the purpose of staving off the starvation of people and livestock.” (Marko) *(T/N: Couldn’t find any proper plant for Narukoma, Puck grass seems to be a plant spouting at the beginning of spring)*

“That is... but, putting horses aside, won’t poultry and pigs dislike that?” (Akseli)

“Yes. But even that depends how you go about it... well, if humans can endure eating it, other animals can get used to it accordingly.” (Marko)

“... I see, that means this is one of the tricks to the secret, huh?” (Akseli)

The voice of the boy continues on.

“Also, horses, excluding those used as warhorses... you can also limit the breeding to smaller horses.” (Marko)

“Oh? Does that also mean that you don’t use animals like horses and oxen for manual labour in this village?” (Akseli)

“Economise it, if you can. It is compensated by the great effort of the villagers... please view it like that.” (Marko)

“... Ha?” (Akseli)

“I want to keep it a secret that it’s nothing more than eating horse meat even if it’s the meat of small horses. As a village shouldering a part of the territorial horse breeding, I just want to avoid the bad influence of being glared at by horse traders.” (Marko)

“I see... it happens to a degree on battlefields, but there are people avoiding it in their daily lives too.” (Akseli)

“It will save us trouble if we can receive your consideration.” (Marko)

The popularity of warhorses from the Earl Helrevi territory is high. The dense miasma and cold winds have a perfect effect on horses, huh? They are resilient and brave in contests, which makes them the most suitable to deploy on the battlefield. Even so, comparing them to small horses is equivalent to the

comparison between a high-class painting and scribbles... at least Akseli, as soldier, thinks so. Small horses are small and stout as their name gives away. Their temperament is whimsy and they are difficult to handle as well. As they can endure with nothing but plain food, they have a merit as livestock, eh? (They put more priority on this than nurturing and selling warhorses... It's pretty much coherent with their logic and connects to qwamp, I guess?) (Akseli)

Akseli remembered a small out-of-place feeling. A sense of discomfort might have returned.

(This village is... that's right. The strange feeling in this village, to sum it up, it's regulation. The regulation completely feels like the military rule imposed widely at the front lines. It isn't an assembly of people swinging from joy to sorrow every day. There is a leader using a strong system... and, did that person predict the cold weather damage and the crop failures? Without that it's not possible to explain it adequately.) (Akseli)

And it was that boy he looked at after all.

Not flaunting his presence and not attracting the eyes of others by hiding among the children, weren't these qualities of a proper leader? In fact, the children's mysterious games, all of them were proposed by this boy. It's one day after coming to this village, merely one day... Akseli thinks... isn't this boy called Marko in the center of all the surprises I observed during this day?

“By the way, would you lend me some nail clippers? My nails have ended up cracking a bit.” (Akseli)

The reaction to those words of Akseli was divided. Herman was startled. Marko revealed a joyful look on his face. Saying 「I will」, he left his seat. He brought nail clippers and a nail file.

“Those are good items. This kind of nail clippers is fairly expensive even in the territory's capital. However, it seems to be spread in every household in this village. Dyed textiles as well. This is my opinion, but if you look at the women you will also understand a lot about the standard livelihood of the group. Especially the hands. To make it blatant... in this village there is an income of money that is not included in the regular calculations.” (Akseli)

While polishing the nails of his fingers properly, he brought up his own standpoint. Akseli looked at Herman and Marko in turns. *The face of the middle-*

aged man has become stiff. That is indicating that his wariness has strengthened. On the other hand, the face of the boy, that has traces of immaturity, floated something like a smile. But, the glint in his eyes is intense. (It's completely as if a bird of prey has perceived its game. Grasping each and every single move... no, it's different. It's not different. There is even more ferocity without any constraints. It's not just sharp but also profound. He is seeing through every fibre to the depths of the person called me.) (Akseli)

While he didn't change his expression or put on a façade at all, Akseli put strength into his lower part, that was hidden under the table. Intending to relax, he loosens his middle forehead and cheeks. He doesn't swallow the saliva that accumulated under his tongue. It's because he can't gulp it down without making a sound.

The buzzing of bugs, that were lured to the light, irregularly resounded and interrupted the silence repeatedly. The warmth of the orange light can't be felt now. Akseli's view was put under pressure without being even certain whether the blue pupils were merely far away or close-by. If someone told him that he was under some magic effect, he would probably end up consenting to it with a "I fear so."

"It appears that First Lieutenant-dono has the aptitude to reach the rank of general." (Marko)

Murmuring this, the boy offered him sake. Akseli wasn't able to find fault with his impolite remark. His mind didn't have such composure. Above all, he wasn't close to a state where he even was able to trade words. He had defied his limit of discomfort and verbal capacity. Nonchalantly receiving the sake in a sake cup, he brings it as casually as possible to his mouth. Without putting down the sake cup, he gulped down 2 and then 3 sips in one go. He catches his breath with the nose while being covered by the sake cup.

Having renewed his preparedness, the glint in the boy's eyes, that had seized him, quieted down once he put down the cup. Even though he sensed that he himself was being tested, Akseli, far from feeling anger, felt a strange satisfaction. That's because he discovered something new about the boy beyond what he already knew about him.

"... As jest while drinking alcohol, I want to hear about it, not in my official duty

but as private person.” (Akseli)

He asks after including an excuse.



“Reaching the rank of general... in other words, that means that I haven’t reached it yet. I wonder, what the heck I’m lacking your eyes?” (Akseli)

“Loyalty.” (Marko)

It was an immediate reply to the degree of being daunting. And, he isn't able to deny it.

"You look like you know about strategy. Certainly the essential abilities aren't things you list up at length. But all of these abilities function only after you have a leader you must serve. Being your own master and carrying out all kinds of things at your own discretion won't let you exceed the resulting personal affairs by yourself, no matter how far you go. People call that a hobby." (Marko)

Akseli brought the cup to his mouth and faced the boy, who said all this smoothly and bluntly. Mischief is being reflected in the boy's gaze.

"You, who wastes his abilities on a hobby, have no backbone. Even if you intend to shoulder the lives of soldiers, you don't plan to bear the fate of a leader. As you look at everything as somebody else's problem, you only believe in yourself. And you gloat about it. People call that masturbation." (Marko)

With a warped smile his mouth is grinning broadly, "How obscene!" Akseli felt something terrible travel across his spinal column. Something furious is welling up within his chest. His breath clogged up suddenly. The conclusion has been tossed out there.

"Will you choose the twig? Will you discard your claws... ? Stop being half-assed. Isn't that a detestable state?" (Marko)

The boy intensified his dubious smile for an instant, but returned to his prim face after he gulped down the sake cup as if nothing happened. Is it the sound of an insect crashing and bursting open with a squish? The small winged insect, done in by the heat, quietly wriggled on the table and then stopped moving. There is something that was silently extended. It's Akseli's hand which held the sake bottle. The boy and the village headman receive it. Akseli also poured sake into his own sake cup and displayed it by holding it up lightly.

"I received wise words. A prayer for the growth and peacefulness of Kikomaru." (Akseli)

As 3 people gulped down the sake, the sake slid down the throats of 3 people and vanished.

"... This is a nice village after all." (Akseli)

Akseli tells the truth by merely rounding it off.

“The prime cause for obtaining money is the village headman’s son. As the age of that person is 8 years, there isn’t even anything to say any more. That’s because you have to be 12 years old to be obligated to pay taxes. I, who am the inspection official, hold expectations for the next tax collection. Let’s treat the utilization of qwamp as result of coping with an emergency.” (Akseli)

The talks end at that point. The time has advanced far into the night. If it’s humans, they should lay down their bodies and close their eyes. It is the village girl called Hannah who performed the tasks of leading him to the guest room, preparing the bed and providing the water for the water basin. Akseli, who observed her taking care of the boy with reverence, asked only one thing. It’s a question where he didn’t even expect an answer. It’s before retiring. He might have wanted to express his agitation without sobering up.

“The boy called Marko... what kind of person is he?” (Akseli)

The girl, who smoothed out the blanket, told him without hesitation in her eyes.

“Bou-chama is “Fate”” (Hannah) *(T/N: Bou = Boy, chama = chan + sama ... affectionate way of honourable address, I guess)*

Akseli laughed. *That is the foretold child.* Waiting eagerly for something, continuing to search for something and hoping for something, the boy in front of him was the embodiment of this... he was convinced of that. *That is certainly fate. My life before today and after today will change, whether I want it or not.*

Akseli Anel

He owns the blood-line of a lower noble in the Asuria Kingdom. As he completed the Royal Military Academy with excellent grades, he was sent to the front since the war situation was deteriorating. Fighting in many battles as essential reinforcement on various battlefields because of his high adaptability, he obtained reliable results no matter where he was dispatched. His wish to return to the military academy after the “Sacred Flame Festival” never came true. He was transferred to the Helrevi territorial army due to his stance of liking the duty of rear support.

And, encountering “Fate,” his name will be known as the sole chief general of

Marko's followers.

As wide-versed person, having both wisdom and courage, exhibiting his keen abilities in strategy and internal administration, Marko's trust in him was deep. Many of his achievements were partly built upon independent, separate missions. In fact, there are theories that he tried scheming his independence, but on the other hand, the words, he told his adjutant, were left behind.

“I'm aware of my own capabilities and I, who dislikes to go beyond myself, have no aptitude for being king. I'm a lazy person even though I work hard. It's nice if I only have work that's worth to be done. Pardon me from something like building a history of being in the lead.” (Akseli)

We don't know whether it's the truth or a lie. However, once you talk about Marko's exploits, it is impossible to talk about it while hiding the name Axel Anel, whose reputation went to the degree of “workaholic.” The activities, where he left his marks, cover a lot of ground, but many historians, who talk about the relation between him and Marko, indicate his inspection of Kikomaru as 「Official for patrolling the remote regions」 as first step. Even if the significance itself can't be seen, one should pay attention to the exceedingly important consequence of the following second step.

At the time Akseli visited Kikomaru once again after his inspection finished, the name Marko appeared for the first time in historical records. And as a first mark that largely changed the fates of the Asuria Kingdom and the Eberia Empire, it became a day that was talked about for a long, long time.

Chapter 9: Customer, this is a great medicine

“Ohhh, so this is the rumoured secret medicine “Filtered and refined white peach paste”? I hear it has an omnipotent effect.” (Barber)

Peering into the small jar, that he carried in his big hands, with curious eyes, the man, calling himself a barber or such, said in an easygoing tone. The boy with his peculiar eye colour is feigning a behaviour of actually viewing it as someone else’s problem. The peddler Lauri had scruples to smile as he tried to comb down his beard. Because there is no sign of him dropping it even in the stagecoach that shakes with a loud noise, his attachment to it is quite considerable.

“I’m not the pupil of a witch. It’s not like this is omnipotent. However, there’s no doubt about its efficiency as medicine.” (Marko)

Deliberately speaking of witches, which are a taboo of the church, he denies that. Suspicious-looking, unusually effective medicines and elixirs always give a hint of being related to a witch. By doing the exact opposite, he aims to increase the credibility in return.

“It won’t have any bad influence even if you eat it, but it’s a medical cream. Basically it shows its effect by applying it on the skin. It’s effective against incision, itching, festering, frostbite and scalding. Its effectiveness is to such an extent that it even astonishes characteristically worried women for that reason. It cures hands, that became rough through scrubbing and washing, at once. It also works perfectly against wrinkles and spots on the skin.” (Lauri)

It is a practised speech. Setting aside his singing of praise, Lauri took the barber’s hand. Scooping up something white and soft with his finger from within the dim, small jar, he smears it on the man’s backhand. *I probably should see to painting the jar after all.* There is no resistance. The white cream spread cleanly right away from the start.

“Oh, an amazing massage. Hasn’t my hand become excessively smooth?” (Barber)

Pinching and stroking his own hand, the barber can’t conceal his interest and personal curiosity any more. *It stands to reason,* Lauri nodded slightly. If it’s the

occupation of a barber, he won't just use it privately but also for his work. *I'm sure it will become popular if I use this well.*

But, there's still much more to come... they will desire it more and more, Lauri thinks. It's not only because he has confidence in the article. This is already something you can call the real thrill of a merchant. He whispers in the barber's ears though there isn't even any necessity any more.

"For a well-versed usage, there's also the trick of applying it on the back. This will relieve you of getting chilled while asleep." (Lauri)

The barber stopped his preparations and shortly thereafter expressed a slight let-down on his face with an "Uh-huh."

"For an even more well-versed usage, there's even the trick of applying it in the hair. That will, ah, what a..." (Lauri)

"... What is it? Tell me, what kind of effect will it have?" (Barber)

Laughing with a smile, he told him boldly.

"What it is... ? It will decrease the fallen hair." (Lauri)

"Bought! Please sell it to me!" (Barber)

Whether for himself or for his work... Lauri had a good business feeling in regards to the forceful clinging of the client. Receiving the payment, he gives him several jars. At the end they tightly shook hands. Both are savouring the happiness of having carried out a good trade. Once Lauri turned around while pouring his nasal breath in satisfaction on his beard, the black-haired, blue-eyed boy is once again nodding with a sound of agreement.

"Splendidly done." (Marko)

"Haha, the signs were good, that's what it was, right?" (Lauri)

Kikomaru's village headman's son, Marko, wearing a lovely hat tailored out of pelt, is smiling. However, they are currently concealing his title. He is now getting on the coach as apprentice of the peddler Lauri. Actually, he isn't even teaching him a single thing as merchant, on the contrary, he is also a responsible party as manufacturer of the greatly popular merchandise 「White transparent gloss」, but the truth is that pretty much all of it is a big lie.

Lauri has now finished writing down the transaction in his account book defying the swaying stagecoach. He reconfirmed the number of stock within the luggage. There is still an ample amount. It is suitable for peddling given its expensive price per unit on top of being able to transport a great number of them due to its small size. Furthermore, it's irresistible because of the lively smiles of the clients. It results in him wanting to worship it spontaneously.

(It's a fantastic item. I'm a really fortunate person to deal in it.) (Lauri)
It hasn't been put on the market for more than a year yet, but beyond producing worshippers at every place we went to, I want to establish it on the market and steadily increase the staff, is Lauri's true opinion. However, Marko is stopping that. The organisation isn't ready for an increase in production. That's because it is complicated to invest in it with the circumstances surrounding Kikomaru.

White transparent gloss... its main ingredient is the fat of a short horse. The leaf of the root crop qwamp, that ignores barren soil and is resilient against miasma, is included as unique ingredient. Although it is possible to extract the essence by boiling it in water, the short horse accumulates that essence by eating the leaves raw. Before long, it will bring forth an oil with a potent medicinal effect. Explaining this, Marko even added another thing at the end. That is from the knowledge of the minority in the north.

As a matter of fact, Lauri was responsible for the sales. Selling the popular white transparent gloss that had definite effects became a precious way of earning money for Kikomaru. But that popularity conversely gave birth to danger in the business as well. If they increased the amount circulated on the market, it would spur on a rising degree of attention. They have been concealing the producer and the manufacturing method and thus they are a small business currently, but if these aspects became known to merchants and nobles, they would only exploit the abundance of the current Kikomaru down to its roots... that is Marko's judgement.

In fact, around half a year ago an inspection official was dispatched to Kikomaru. As they properly paid the annual tribute in spite of the continuing crop failures and damages from the cold as of late, they provoked suspicion in return. There wasn't anyone investigating about the white transparent gloss, but since the white transparent gloss' profit on sales was the reason that the village didn't

stagger, you could call this a dangerous point. Marko talked calmly about it, however even Raulee wiped away his cold sweat.

(The territory of Earl Helrevi is known for its strictness. There are many villages engaged in pioneering the remote regions. They are serving as supply stations. If you say that's inevitable, then it can't be helped, but... based on the character of Earl-sama, who lacks any kind of compassion, this point might be a large one.) (Lauri)

Correcting the blanket over his shoulders, Lauri surveyed the wintry, desolate, rural landscape. *It's a dreary one as well. The wheat bales all over have utterly gone bad due to the rain and are neglected without being put away. The livestock isn't maintained. Can they at least save the sparsely appearing deep-green Sierra wheat sown in winter?*

The amount of taxes is slightly harsh for this kind of land. The tax collectors are known to be extremely inflexible on the collection. That doesn't mean that they are too rigorous, but it also never happens that there's a reduction or exemption from taxes in consideration of crop failures. The result of this policy is this scenery. I wonder how many villages were hit very hard with punishments and poverty in merely 2 years. Just how many of the farmers are slaves in disguise?

(By no means I think so, but it isn't on purpose, is it... ? The restoration will soon hit the critical juncture of running for 10 years now. The demand for warhorses has fallen as well. It is a good time to change the type of industry. If you have funds, it's a good chance to start a large business binding the labour force. Will the ranches dedicated to short horses increase even more?) (Lauri)

Lauri tried to think about the dream shown by the white oil, but then shook his head. He sighed once as well.

(No good, no good. I'm getting too enchanted by the white transparent gloss. If you have this, it's something that will save mothers all over the country... the adult women of Kikomaru are really healthy women. Somehow I wanna also spread it to the small to medium villages. But, it isn't a situation where I can simply do that either. I won't do anything unreasonable. I cannot afford to hinder Marko with my petty, narrow-minded thinking.) (Lauri)

As he turned for a glance, Marko was silently gazing at a far distant place. More than 2 years have passed since Lauri met this mysterious boy. With him having

turned 8 years this year, the young dragon couldn't yet grab the chance to ascend to the high sky. *If you consider that chance to result in new wars, it's fine if it is several years from now*, Lauri was thinking.

It's because I'm aware of it.

Even if he is someone holding a destiny, unexpected death is a reality.

The lives of people are surprisingly cheap. In case of the feudal lord's thought 「This year's tax collection isn't splendid」, that context can lead to grief and demise of many lives. I think any kind of unfeeling policy will sever lives that should have been born before it happens. All the more if it's on the battlefield. Just a single victory or defeat causes countless lives to disappear. Whoever dies, their chances will die as well... Lauri hugged his blanket feeling a chill.

“This year's winter looks to be intense as well, right? Here you are.” (Marko)

Marco handed over his own blanket. Although it was loaded and tied in the luggage, he expressly unfolded it. Raulee felt thankful but at the same time pathetic as well.

“I'm a person sensitive to heat. These clothes are far too thick as well.”
(Marko)

Saying this, Marko pinched his hat and clothes. This even made Lauri smile wryly.

He is thickly clad in clothes. He is unable to endure staying below the blanket any longer after he prepared it for Lauri. There is the matter of the strong wishes of three people, the village headman, his wife and Hannah. Marko, who is remarkably behaving more like an adult compared to the time of meeting him, rather increased his meddling in regards to the aspects of health in his restricted talks about such things as decisions and actions.

The journey to the territorial capital certainly was the longest distance to be travelled in Marko's life. However, for Lauri this kind of journey is part of his daily life. *For the boy, who is a young dragon, it is probably something trifling as well. That's because his “mysteriousness” puts the territorial capital, not to mention the royal capital, into the confines of restricted thinking as well. No matter how much I'm called his guardian... no, it's because I'm his guardian, I guess?* Lauri thought back.

(Whatever child it is, its parents are its parents. They want to feed it so that its

belly is filled. They probably want to keep it warm with something. And if there are no other worries, they might be under too much pressure. This is a wonderful thing.) (Lauri)

“What is it? You look so happy.” (Marko)

“Ah, sorry, sorry, I just thought that you are loved.” (Lauri)

Raulee, who was sent to a merchant’s store as apprentice as a very young child, envies him slightly. Although he felt like he had seen his mother crying, he can’t remember his father’s face at all. He also worked at his home and the merchant’s store all through the year in short sleeves and bare foot. From his point of view, Marko’s outfit can’t probably be called anything but slightly inappropriate for an apprentice.

(But, this is a precious feeling. I want to value it.) (Lauri)

Marko most likely thinks this, I assume, Lauri thinks. Is it that stuffy? While correcting the hat on his head many times over, Marko can’t completely unfasten its fluffy pelt. He only fixed its current location. *As effect of the slightly big size, the hat emphasizes his youthfulness and loveliness. I wonder whether he knows himself or not that his appearance could be called that of a beautiful little girl.*

“Mu... for some reason I feel a faint discomfort.” (Marko)

“Well. you mustn’t say such things lacking filial piety.” (Lauri)

“No, it’s not about that... well, I admit that I’m not a dutiful son either.” (Marko)

“Yeah? I have a feeling that you are more dutiful to your parents than other children.” (Lauri)

Returning these words with a shake of his head, Marko murmured with a sigh blended in,

“It’s the atonement of a changeling.” (Marko)

His profile looking downwards seemed terribly sad and transient. Lauri, who is wondering whom Marko is picturing. once again thought about that person. That person, worrying about Marko without showing her tremendous pain, probably is currently praying for his safety while travelling.

The sickness of Marko's mother is getting more and more critical. Even if she lives through the winter, she won't last until summer... this was the commonly agreed opinion of everyone.



The territorial capital of the Earldom Helrevi.

Even without a precise count it is a city where more than 50000 people have gathered to live. The outer walls enclosing the city are tall and solid. It isn't any different for the inner walls and the castle either. If you were to pass Eberia and Earldom Salmant as well as Earldom Peterius, which are next to the Plains of Wandering Calamity, you will walk into a large river at the tip called Eastern Dragon River. Earldom Helrevi is on its opposite shore. Though there are only few soldiers on standby, they are aware of being a defensive stronghold.

Lauri and Marko finished entering the territorial capital from the main gate, however the plaza in front of the gate was submerged in an unexpected chaos and tumult as twilight was approaching. People, who became tattered, horses and carts... a merchant caravan was attacked by thieves. From seeing armed people being mixed among the wounded, it was a safe bet that those were the guards accompanying the caravan. The investigation of the soldiers is continuing.

"I heard thieves have appeared, but never did I expect them to get this close to the territorial capital..." (Lauri)

Lauri couldn't help but feel fear. By looking at the state of the injuries of the people, you could guess that the place and time of the attack was very close to Lauri's group. *The thieves didn't aim for us because of the low profits from a simple stagecoach and such, but if we were to get involved in it, I don't know what would have happened.*

The fact that we arrived peacefully and without any events at the territorial capital might be owed to the prayers of Marko's mother. Lauri, whose real feelings were such, bowed his head in the direction of Kikomaru.

"... Too late." (Marko)

It is Marko who released such a remark. His view has been turned toward outside the gate. Everyone else was paying attention to the injured. It seems he

was the only to look in another direction.

“What’s late?” (Lauri)

“The sortie of the rapid reaction force.” (Marko)

He doesn’t even look back to Lauri. His discernment is sharp.

“If they don’t send out troops for tracking them down and killing them, they will regret it. The next victims will only increase as time passes. It’s equal to a danger for the entire domain too. And yet there are no signs of them even sending out scouts.” (Marko)

While he is looking, the soldiers are in the process of gathering. The soldiers carrying bows on top of the walls and the soldiers carrying spears around the gate, each of them amounted to around 200, I guess.

“Umm... I think there are still some more soldiers to be gathered. At any rate, I don’t think they will lose against thieves with these walls, however...” (Lauri)

Lauri says timidly. He is an amateur when it comes to military affairs. Even as he felt relieved seeing the soldiers and the wall, there was Marko’s earlier remark. He got cold feet a bit.

“Please look at that.” (Marko)

Marko points at the wounded.

“Those guards might be part of a mercenary group looking at their armaments. They seem to have combat experience as well. While even defeating such military group, the thieves let the horses and carts get away. That means that their goal wasn’t to plunder the caravan with their attack.” (Marko)

“The thieves are... not plundering? What are they planning?” (Lauri)

“They are sounding out. This attack, in all probability, was for the sake of testing the immediate response of the territorial capital. With an attack happening close to this territorial capital, which has the largest military power within the domain, they let their prey flee on purpose and look at the state of affairs afterwards... seeing all of that, if you make light of this...” (Marko)

Knitting his eyebrows, his usually beautiful voice carried a tinge of a leaden mood. Lauri grandly swallowed the spit that had gathered within his mouth.

“I-If you make light of this?” (Lauri)

“Then it will be a daring attack next time probably causing serious damage. Or maybe they are somehow planning a large-scale military operation. Well, it won’t be a decent situation either way.” (Marko)

Lauri looks at nothing but Marko, who declared this coldly.
In the end, it took until next morning for the scouting party to depart from the territorial capital.

Chapter 10: If you don't improve the public order

The air of the territorial capital is mingled with the fragrance of flowers even though it is winter.

The products of the northern region aren't limited to horses only. They utilize the "Snow-white flower" as ingredient in a perfume. Its market scale is even comparable to that of warhorses. Comparing it to the perfumes consisting of southern flowers, its scent is lacking in depth and gorgeousness. However, as it contains a hearty charm hidden within its modesty, it is considered to cause a desire within men.

Even so, the scent currently surging forth and assailing the bridge of the nose successively isn't that of the "Snow-white flower." If you tried to describe it eloquently, it would be the aroma of many flowers blooming in profusion, but one cannot feel its disturbing intensity as anything but ripe fruits being thrown out.

(A hidden secret is certainly something that hints at the graceful profundity it has. The embodiment of misery is something unabashed. What a foolish thing.)

Even while the noble youth, who is especially prominent at luxurious and gorgeous balls, showed a beautiful appearance similar to that of a painting to his surroundings, displeasure was seeping through him.

Baron Daniel Hakkinen. (*T/N: >> Danieru hakkinen*)

Even though he himself is a nameless person bearing no responsibilities, the family name Hakkinen is holding a significance surpassing its court rank within Asuria Kingdom. Despite being someone having been confined indoors in a remote region, he is a person that will be surrounded by women once he openly appears at social occasions in society.

Once there were 3 knights who made a name in military arts for themselves among the hero's followers... their head was "Viscount" Hakkinen. Among the remaining 2, 1 was his eldest son. If you were to look at the appearances of the knights on the side of the hero in paintings depicting the hero as subject, you would doubtlessly observe that the one drawn as the eldest is the viscount whereas the one drawn as the youngest is his eldest son.

Many poems and plays about the tragedy of the hero's death have been

composed, but not a single among them fails to describe the famous scene of the Hakkinen parent's and child's volunteering. With a battlecry towards Eberia Empire's army approaching in droves, Viscount Hakkinen dies for the sake of cutting open a path of retreat for the hero. Even the eldest son, swinging his sword shoulder-to-shoulder with the hero up until the final moments, defeats the enemies and protects the hero. The hero weeps over their deaths.

But, this has absolutely nothing to do with the truth.

It's no more than a politically-induced story created by the kingdom and the church.

The first task, once the young Daniel became the head of the Hakkinen household after losing his father and elder brother, was to relinquish the rank of Viscount. 「Your father as well as you elder brother would feel ashamed to death for not having protected the hero. It would be the same for me」 was the king's laudable vow... though that has only been noted down in the public records.

In reality it was a punishment. This disgraceful punishment was owed to Father, who attempted to escape with his troops from within the chaos of the predicament, and elder brother, who was killed by some small fry after being a drag unable to stand up out of fear.

Underneath the pretence of such a tearjerker, their territory was confiscated, their official position snatched away and they were sent off to the sticks in the name of independent penitence in a town close to the northern frontier. The king bestowed them what is considered to be “an act of him possessing admirable compassion”, leaving them with only the title of Baron and a severance pay. Daniel's future prospects were wrapped in complete darkness whereas his father and elder brother have been beautifully drawn in splendid paintings that are sold for high prices.

(How dare they draw something magnificent that isn't capable to show what has to be shown. People will only see what they want to see, but because it influences the society, such empty illusions hold a real power. It's a foolish and frightening thing.) (Daniel)

A single oil painting is also hanging on the wall at this banquet. A single ray of light from heaven falls upon the hero's crisis, a single knight, having used up all of his strength, is at his feet... it's the man, who should have become the next

head of the Viscount Hakkinen household after his father's death, having collapsed and laying face up. There is neither tears nor drool on his face. Though Daniel thinks that the face was likely very sticky.

"Ho, this painting must be on your mind after all, I guess?"

Daniel was unable to do anything but grit his teeth over his own blunder towards the voice's owner's agreement. *How dare you make a repulsive stab in a moment of negligence*, he curses. Showing his unique appearance amidst the multicoloured dresses, it was Earl Mathias Helrevi, who was the lord of the territorial capital as well as the organiser of this ball.

"Although it might be a scene making you think, you should be careful and enjoy the food and drinks forgetting about hero-sama's suffering. I won't accept anything else but that." (Mathias) *(T/N: Matthias uses a "you" of addressing someone of lower status)*

"... Thinking about my elder brother's regret, I'm only blaming myself for my own weak-minded nature." (Daniel)

"Hmm, is that so? I guess, that's the way it is." (Mathias)

Even as he watches the smile of contempt on Mathias' face with its buckteeth, Daniel does nothing but simply conducting himself meekly. This about 40 years old man knows about the other side of the hero's legend. It's quite obvious that he has decorated the wall with this painting with malice towards Daniel. Daniel is annoyed at himself for easily stumbling into that trap.

"By the way, you were invited as there is a task only you can do. It's fine for you to follow." (Mathias)

As soon as he said that, Matthias walks towards a small room at the side of the venue without even looking back. There are no other choices but to chase after him available for Daniel. He doesn't stop while being tugged by the ladies either. Daniel deliberately shows an elegant walk as they are nudging against his shoulders and taking glances at his stature.

(It's fine if you project your love with your eyes, you people who are dancing within an illusion.) (Daniel)

Daniel's eyes are reflecting varicoloured small birds dancing at the venue everywhere. *They are just chirping without even realising that they have locked*

themselves into a candy cage. Feeble birds which are unable to fly. Entranced by the dream of something like the bright light of a banquet.

Once he entered the small room that seemingly served only as rest room, he was immediately ordered by Matthias to lock the door. Matthias didn't pick up a sake from the shelves either. While he considered this to be the impatience of someone apparently having his head filled with business, Daniel found this difference in composure funny.

"The day before yesterday there was an attack by thieves in the outskirts of the territorial capital. Have you heard of it?" (Mathias)

"Yes." (Daniel)

"We have been conducting an investigation today and yesterday, but were only able to learn that the thieves are a group of mounted bandits. We still don't know where their stronghold lies. The damage was no big deal, however... it has caused a slightly not so amusing motion in the city." (Mathias)

While showing that he is listening to the state of affairs, told in disgust, by standing at attention, Daniel remembered an unpleasant premonition. This man called Mathias values progressing in everything following what's written in a book. He is an honest man, but he doesn't know the term of dealing with things flexibly and as result he carries out everything by the rules. Such a man is now talking about the details you could even call a tear in the territory's government, going as far as preparing an informal location.

"Motion... it is?" (Daniel)

"Is there something you didn't understand? Mercenaries linked up with escort units and such calling themselves a faction and even came demanding support funds from the castle. Even though they originally wouldn't be recognised as proper conversation partners, those folks brought something like a petition from merchants." (Mathias)

"Petition... you say? That is something quite..." (Daniel)

"Furthermore, it's more than one. It's sufficient if we fortify the security alongside the highway or if we subjugate the thieves. If we don't do this, they are demanding from us to hand out money for the sake of protecting the distribution of goods within in the territory. They even included the trick of citing

the law's provisions... it has become slightly troublesome to deal with.”
(Mathias)

It's unbearable for Daniel after he sent his look over there by accident. He is certain that Mathias will push all of the troubles on to him. Every single of Mathias' expressions had a tinge of hunting. This certainly was the snickering of a hunter who managed to entangle his prey in a snare. Daniel isn't able to suppress his brows to crease.

“Aren't you making much of being the role model of a knight and your noble's pride of your parents and older brother?” (Mathias)

Daniel listens to his voice, with a joyful tongue, along a sense of defeat.

“You have likely seen that magnificent painting. There is no one except me, the four marquis' and the six earls, who knows that this is nothing more than a fabrication. Of course, the king knows as well. Isn't it truly deplorable? In spite of being able to have pride in your noble blood, it's only vanity without being based on any facts.” (Mathias)

Daniel hears the words he doesn't want to hear. Daniel's ears were reverberating with the voice mocking him as younger brother of a coward, as child of a coward. It's something he has continuously heard for a long time, therefore it isn't anything that will now stir his heart. However, all colours faded and vanished from his view. The voice is keeping at it from a distant place.

“You also know that I feel pity for your circumstances, Baron Daniel Hakkinen. If it's the still young you, you still have a proper chance to rinse yourself from the stigma. Therefore... what will you do? I wonder if you won't resolve such distress using your resourcefulness?” (Mathias)

Supposing there was one thing unfit to play its role within his hand, he will abandon it without a single shred of hesitation, if he is urged by necessity to immediately cut it off at some occasion. That one thing is definitely me. He would definitely dismiss and abandon me now... Daniel accepted that fact indifferently.

The story is simple. I shall hire an escort group with my own funds, lead them and destroy the thieves without the territory's government becoming aware of it. The situation would result in likely obtaining fame adding to the substance of

the Hakkinen household on that occasion... Such a swindle.

Daniel realises the plot. *It doesn't even matter if this ends in a success or failure.*

At the time Daniel goes into action, Mathias will already have removed the troublesome elements in the city. *From the beginning it is something trivial to arrest thieves. It will be alright if I destroy the thieves, but even if I don't destroy them, it will probably be fine either way since the territory's army won't lose, even if they waste a few soldiers. He just doesn't feel inclined to move the territory's army except for guarding military materials.*

(Humph... Is the next rank, Viscount, and territory something that has to be paid with assets and lives?) (Daniel)

Even while harbouring emotions that chill his interior due to those forceful methods, Daniel doesn't consider this to be the worst. He knew of situations that had an even worse conclusion. *Looking at it relatively, this degree is an unfortunate exaggeration.*

While being shaken in the carriage heading towards the inn close to the castle, Daniel showed a sarcastic smile.

It was a pillar of flames he imagined. This was the worst for Daniel. Although it was a man, who lived the exact opposite life of his father and elder brother, he died on that day in those flames. *That man, who bravely wielded his weapon from atop a horse plunging his enemies into the depths of dread and leading an army... hasn't Salomon been killed by a vision of insanity?*

There's no mistake to it, Daniel has concluded. A person, dominating the reality of a cruel battlefield... even someone like that has ended up getting killed by the illusions of this country. It wasn't something that bore reason or truth. If somebody thinks that they want to do so and if some people approve of it, it will form into a dream of death you can't oppose. It's definitely a nightmare.

(Ah... I live in an absurd period where dreams trespass on reality. Such emptiness.) (Daniel)

Even as he gazes out through the window at the city's night, he doesn't show any signs of something like longing towards the roads connecting to the high-class lodging houses or the territory's castle. What Daniel desires is a woman. That doesn't mean that any woman will do. Not one with the gorgeousness of a lady and neither one with the bewitchment of a prostitute. A woman nonchalantly keeping her own definite "innocence" with a neat and clean

interior lacking any decorations... he wants to have a dream with a girl similar to snow-white flowers.

However, wild flowers are blooming in the fields. He has ended up being firmly cut off from nature in this small world confined by the walls. Even the moonlight is somehow cold in this grey world. It is harmful to the eyes giving him the impression of a tough block of ice being no more than a cage all over. Daniel touches the window's curtains with his hand. But he doesn't close it. He hits two times against the carriage's roof with his hand.

It appeared as if he had seen a mysterious colour. It was something sticking out like a sore thumb. It disappeared into a building.

After the carriage stopped before long, he got down on the stone paving. Telling the coachman to wait, he crossed the street with his cloak fluttering. A faint scent of sake is drifting from the store that faced out on the street. Among the bars of several certain territorial army purveyors, there is a single fairly high-class store. Without even hesitating, he enters it.

The inside of the store was deserted. If it is an lower-class store, they will also serve cheap sake, but it seems like they won't serve anything but expensive sake here. Daniel recognises the aroma. The quality of customers seems to be centred around non-commissioned officers and company officers without regular soldier even making an appearance here.

He understood this right away.

A single child sat at a table far in the back. Its body is wrapped in fine, tailored pelt clothes and it has a bundle arranged on its knees with proper manners. The chair is too tall, thus its feet don't reach the floor. *A girl... no, probably a boy? Although a child, I can't even distinguish the gender.* Daniel felt astonishment and confusion. And he considers this to be inevitable as well.

That child was far too much of a foreign object.

In this world, where dream and reality have become entwined and vague, only this child has a distinct and clear contour... it feels as if it is overwhelming its surroundings. It's not an obstinate reality nor is it the devilishness of a dream, it's an earthen image giving way and grasping tightly the reins of either, Daniel hallucinated.

(What... What's this called? Why am I not able to be this strong? Is this small person, you don't even know whether it's a boy or a girl, really a human being

just like me? Though it certainly isn't some kind of witch or evil person either.)
(Daniel)

The child's black hair is flowing smoothly. Both blue eyes are turning towards Daniel. *It's going to open its mouth. What kind of sound and words will it spin?*
Daniel impatiently waited for that.

"... First Lieutenant-dono, would you introduce this Seargent-dono? No matter how I look at it, I think he is obviously different from the story." (Marko)

"No, well, he is different, however... he is a well-known person. What's this about?" (Akseli)

Once he accidentally shifted his sight, he caught sight of the soldier sitting across the child. Daniel recognised that man. It's Akseli Anel, First Lieutenant of the territorial army. He is a man making an appearance here and there for routine tasks, in spite of his rank. He also came visiting Daniel's mansion.

"First Lieutenant Anel, huh?" (Daniel)

"Long time no see, Baron Hakkinen." (Akseli)

Even as he tries to stand up to bow, this man somehow can't conceal his happy facial expression. Daniel prompted him with his eyes to not mind. It's not an act done out of pride as noble. He doesn't have the slightest idea in his mind how to deal with this child as if was mesmerized.

"Baron, this child is called by the name Marko. He is the apprentice of a peddler. Marko, this esteemed gentleman is the head of the Baron Hakkinen household. Even you should have at least been told about his honourable family name, right? Fix your manners in front of him." (Akseli)

He looked at Daniel. Descending to the floor, this child displays a flawless bow. Daniel shivered.

He smiles. It's a really delightful smile. However, what kind of smile is it?

The lonely wind blowing within Daniel's mind ceased. The ashen desert called desolation vanished as well. Everything ended up being reduced to ashes by this fearsome smile. *The residue of the flames heats up my body a lot more than any sake. This might possibly be madness...* Daniel smiled sincerely. He thinks that it has been a long time since he done that last.

(I see, this is the real deal...) (Daniel)

How much time swept by as they stared at each other without even a single word?

“Oyyy! I got here, Akseli! Calling me on my off-duty day!”

An aged, angry voice burst with a bang. The old soldier, who approached causing violent footsteps and having the rough nasal breathing of a drunkard, loudly opens his mouth towards Akseli... and suddenly shrivelled. With an appearance of peeking around restlessly, he now, after all that noise, asks Akseli in a whispering voice,

“Oy, Axely, what’s all of this about? To what place did I come? No, don’t laugh... oy. I came to scold the chap who instigated the mercenaries and merchants, but...” (Old soldier)

Daniel laughed. It was in an unexpectedly loud voice. He felt that something old had ended and that something new had started.

Chapter 11: I'm not overly familiar with fairy tales

For nobles there's something called a noble's conduct. One among those is the that it's not allowed to stay at a cheap inn. It is absolutely necessary for them to wear clothes and eat food proper to their status. If they, who were granted their peerage by royalty, were to be shabby, it wouldn't only hurt their own honour but also result in damaging the prestige of the king himself.

"... that's the reason. There isn't any ill intention. I want you to relax even if it is a plain room." (Daniel)

What kind of effect had Daniel's words on those 4 people? If you tried to judge their average age, it was men in good health, who sat down as they pleased surrounding the table with the prepared food and drinks in the room.

"In other words, it's a farewell party of sorts, isn't it? Drinking sake while talking with your companions. With the degree of diversity in culture here, this isn't an exceeding feast from ancient times. With only men here, there isn't even a single flower present either... that's not the reason either, I wonder?" (Akseli)

One of them is a man called the handyman of the Helrevi feudal army, First Lieutenant Akseli Anel of the territorial army. Not only one can sense his ability as soldier from his physique, but he is also endowed with elegance in anything he does. Even at this place he picks up the sake cup in a well-accustomed manner. *This attitude of a definite composure is probably a fact for the people chosen to be at this place, Daniel thinks. Although there are people holding a favourable impression of him, he would likely be scorned, if it was those close to Earl Helrevi for example.*

"What's up with ya? Do you plan on calling some prostitutes over? I will go home then. What's with this room? Even under normal circumstances it's detestable to spill a single drop of sake... don' add bothersome things to it." (Jarkko)

One of them is Sergeant Jarkko (T/N: >> Yarukko <<), a senior soldier of the Helrevi feudal army. *Is it because the three attributes of a long white beard, a short, stout build and a sour look have been gathered together, I wonder? For*

Daniel it was somehow inevitable to consider this old soldier a dwarf from illustrated stories. Their first meeting was something quite boisterous, but Axely introduced him as demon sergeant displaying unparalleled bravery on the battlefield.

“No, not at all, Sergeant-dono. Let bygones be bygones since that’s probably not what he meant. First Lieutenant-dono is an excellent person that considers the danger to himself occasionally albeit seeing many scary things. I’d like to be excused from getting involved in that.” (Lauri)

One of them is the peddler called Lauri. His gentle features are showing a smile that makes him really amiable. *That’s also why his beard gives a quite ridiculous impression, I guess? However, he is a capable person, Daniel has assessed. He has clout among many merchants, moreover he hasn’t settled down anywhere. Not only is he upright, but also someone showing a powerful conviction.* And, there’s one more person.

“Whoa... there is slight discomfort for some reason.” (Marko)

Without even a family name and at an age of 10 (*Author miss I guess, it’s 8*) years, which one wouldn’t suspect, it’s the boy with name Marko. *If I had to comment on his appearance, he’s a beautiful child with black hair and blue eyes. Once he becomes an adult, he will certainly fascinate men and women. However, now, it might result in something interesting, if something like a portrait of him sitting silently was to be drawn.*

However, the corners of Daniel’s mouth crooked.

“Although I told you to not misunderstand, I’m already 8 years old. And, all of you had been 8 years at some point too. I urge you to try remember that. Did you harbour any kind of irritation towards the teasing of adults when you were 8 years old yourselves?” (Marko)

“What a troublesome lot”, with an appearance of shaking his head, it has a touch of an exaggerated buffoonery. *He is playing the fool.* Opposite to Jarkko, who cocks his head in puzzlement as he doesn’t understand, the others aren’t able to endure holding it in. Akseli and Lauri raised their voices in a grand laughter. Daniel also laughed. They lifted up their sake cup without knowing from whom they got it and gulped down the contents together.



(To arrive at an evaluation of this boy, stuff like age and outward appearance... !) (Daniel)

He is a child adopting a mature speech and conduct unfitting his own age. He is also a child impertinently talking down adults. However, this Marko isn't a regular, gifted person of this world... Daniel has confidence in that. He is enjoying the feeling of passionate throbbing for his own fate.

Three days had passed since the evening when Daniel entered the bar chasing after Marko. Those were 3 days that changed the future of many people. All of the world's hues reflected in Daniel's eyes are transforming.

The 5 people, who gathered here this evening, are companions sharing one project.

The Hakkinen escort group.

The leader is Daniel. Akseli and Jarkko are serving as commanding officers of the combat group with its currently 150 mercenaries attached. Daniel has been responsible for a greater part of the funds. The remaining has been provided as support money by several merchants. The one in charge as accountant is Lauri. The prime objective is to guard the merchants travelling the highway. They are to put priority on the cargo of the merchants supporting them. Besides that, they are to take over the task for less money than the normal escorts. If there was damage to the goods, they would pay a compensation.

It won't be the end of the subjugation unit, if they lose. Managing it as an organisation, it's a group maintained by an increase of profits. The forecast of the management has already risen due to the many merchants supporting them. It is a fact that Daniel was forced to do this as a personal matter... but the unexpected twist of that was the effectiveness of the name taken by the group. The family name Hakkinen is superb as signboard. They are supported by an illusion.

It is Marko who planned and prepared everything.

It was him, who gave the merchants and mercenaries a hint and stirred them up to form a guard unit. *Even more, what strange coincidence that he contacted Akseli at that place to draw out a secret cooperation from the territorial army?* Daniel latched onto that.

Marko's actions, knowing of Daniel's lineage and circumstances, were fast. He drew a diagram showing a complete prediction of the organisation explaining it with 「It's about being able to manage an unofficial private army that is acknowledged by the feudal lord」 due to Daniel's complaining about having troubles forced on him. Once Daniel approved of it, even while being overwhelmed, they hurried towards persuading the merchants alongside Lauri and entrusted the recruitment of mercenaries to Akseli.

Legally speaking, Marko shouldn't even have the right to do something like

ordering a company officer of the territorial army. He shouldn't have, but for some reason Akseli was in high spirits to be of use. Towards Daniel, who voiced his doubt, Lauri answered with the words 「Such are the mysteries in Marko's surroundings」. Speaking of Akseli, he accepted the directive 「Your mission is to observe Baron Hakkinen」 from the feudal lord before anyone became aware of it while choosing the mercenaries.

“He is someone who does things diligently to the degree of not sparing his household and expenses. Suggesting it as troublesome situation, I was appointed to it without him even suspecting anything as I had volunteered to do it myself. Well, it won't raise my evaluation or cause any congratulations though.” (Akseli)

While he was at it, he has even seen to Jarkko's application for extended leave to pass through. *Probably he used health issues as pretext for that, but as a result that judgement is laughable.* Daniel laughed at that, but that caused the old soldier to become angry. Although he immediately apologized, Jarkko probably calmed down due to the influence of Marko's words.

“You are sturdy as soldier. That's something everyone, who knows you, understands. Even I realised that at one glance. First Lieutenant-dono did that on purpose. The health issues only served as pretext. Even though Baron-sama laughed, he hasn't only perceived it as funny story. That's because you are full of ambition.” (Marko)

Even while expressing his complaints in grunts, Jarkko's mood was changing to the better. And, feeling merry, he joins the circle of the recruited mercenaries. There are many who know of him, who is a veteran soldier with a long military record. They are idolising his firmness of character to rebuke someone disregarding whether they are nobles or anyone else. And all the more since he is even good at taking care of others with his kind compassion despite his appearance.

In regards to Daniel, he had to make courtesy calls everywhere in his role as representative of the organisation. Everything has been prepared by Marko. The meeting of merchants and the review of the organisation's members are important tasks as well. Of course it can't be helped that Marko cannot sign and seal the official documents. For Daniel, who lived every day wasting away in

boredom, all of that was fun.

Thus, three days passed like surging waves and they arrived at the opportunity to devote themselves to the sake cups this evening.

“However. as former 8 years old, I give up. It’s also somewhat different from what the current 8 years old says after all.” (Daniel)

Once Daniel tries to reheat this topic,

“Are there two such lads? The adults won’t be needed then.” (Jarkko)

While drinking the sake emphatically, Jarkko insults them with his rude mouth. *It seems that this old soldier had discarded all of his manners on some unknown battlefields.* Daniel returned a 「Is that so?」. *The sake is really delicious.*

“Certainly, it would probably be a disaster for the world if there were two or three Marcos.” (Akseli)

Although Akseli sighed as if it would be really unbearable, his mouth’s edges were slanting upward. And, a sharp light dwelled in the look he turned towards Daniel.

“Even only one is already a child that influences the world greatly. It reminds me of the fable “The three-headed Snake King.” Having magic expected to protect the golden grape, each of its heads was great and thus they fell in disorder. In the end the grape was eaten... by the “White Wolf.”” (Akseli)

That is a bedtime story read to children. It’s just a story with uncertain origins. Daniel of course knows about it as well. He also understood the intention of Akseli, who talked about it. His own mouth’s edges are slanting as well. Akseli has warned Daniel 「Do not misunderstand」.

It can be understood as if Marko was imitating one of the snake’s heads, but it’s different. Instead, it might be Daniel and Akseli who are the snake heads.

However, that doesn’t mean that Marko represents the grape. Most likely the Hakkinen escort group is the grape, Daniel surmises. Akseli’s words might also have the aim for them to have bit more humility towards their project in comparison to the snake king.

That’s because Marko is most likely the white wolf.

A silver wolf, who has sharper claws and is smarter than anyone thinking they are superior. Being the hero of the fable’s world, the children are cheering him

on in his adventures of glory and hardships. Even Daniel anticipated that. And, even among the many famous scenes of the story, there is only one that is popular, the “Misunderstanding of the Monkey King.”

It had been arranged that the white wolf was to cooperate with the monkey king, who was on top of a tree, in a strange situation. The white wolf runs around for the sake of the monkey king, who loathes to descend to the ground, and brings a lot of gains to him. The white wolf did that with good intentions, but the monkey king misunderstood that as his loyalty towards the desire to have the tree’s nuts. It reached the point that he gave the white wolf high-handed orders.

There are three conclusions. They are used differently depending on the character and age of the child the story was read to. The first tells of the white wolf running up the tree and biting the monkey king to death. The second tells of the white wolf biting the root of the tree and having the monkey king drop to the ground, which inflicts serious injuries upon him. The third tells of the white wolf simply leaving and thus abandoning the monkey king.

The ending Daniel prefers was the last one. It’s not because of the gentleness and compassion. Rather, it’s the opposite. *I have no doubt that this conclusion is the one tormenting the monkey king the most. To receive the hostility and hate of someone is in some ways luscious. However, if you were to be forsaken with nothing but silence... it would end in long solitude. I wonder at what kind of memories will the monkey king, all by himself with the nuts, look as a result? What kind of end is awaiting him?* Daniel considered this to be exceedingly cruel. Therefore Daniel answered, accepting Akseli’s gaze directly.

“I also like the story of the white wolf. If I were to accompany that person as a friend on his road of conquest, it would certainly be an honour. And I would even run around instead of him, if we were to run into the monkey king’s kind.”
(Daniel)

I have no doubt that there will be many difficulties and obstacles standing in the way of Marko, who is the white wolf in the shape of a human. The fable’s white wolf won everything even while being wounded, but Daniel knows that the reality is a lot more terrifying than a story. *A man, who was called the hero, was defeated and died. Didn’t the man, who won, die after being labelled as evil person?*

A herald is necessary. Daniel has a hunch. Depending on the kind of difficulties, there is a necessity for people who shoulder those instead of him. Being clad in the illusion called Hakkinen, there must definitely be a role only I can do.

“That’s nice.” (Akseli)

Axely said in absolute delight with a broad smile of mischief.

“It’s alright to take his place, it’s also fine to bite together with him and it’s even alright to win by anticipating it. Humans are beings that escape from their ugliness only when they do the tasks they are skilled at. Good gracious, I have to admit that I’ve recently become a very handsome man.” (Akseli)

“Yeah yeah”, Daniel gave a broad smile. There is an example already here. *(White wolf, it is... ? Since my childhood I had wished to hold its tufty tail. It looks like I will see an amazing world. And above all, I feel great.)* (Daniel)

“This is an important point”, Lauri closes only one eye. *Somehow or other this man has a good sense. And he calms down this place. I’ve heard that he apparently met Marko earlier than anyone else.* At the same time Daniel considered this to be enviable, he felt a single anxiety.

“Though it might be a bit late for that now... it’s really no problem for you, Lauri? If you become a person in charge of the escort group’s office work, you will spend a lot of time together with me in the territorial capital. You won’t be able to freely peddle anymore as you’ve done up until now.” (Daniel)

There is an implicit inquiry in there. That is, it will decrease the time he can spend at Marko’s side. *As a matter of fact, it cannot be helped that Marko, who is the son of the village headman, has to return to the village. That place is in a remote area. There’s no doubt that he will take off grandly eventually, but with an age of 8 years there are restrictions after all.*

“Of course, I don’t mind. I thank you very much for being worried about the lowly me, Baron.” (Lauri)

There’s no lie in the figure returning the reply with a smile. However, it doesn’t dispel Daniel’s worry. *If Lauri doesn’t establish the stronghold of the escort group in the territorial capital, it will certainly become troublesome. Having said that, I don’t want to act like stealing a trusted friend from Marko.*

Probably guessing it from Daniel’s expression, Lauri began to throw glances in

the direction of Marko. Once Daniel tried to follow that, it was Marko who let out a big sigh as result.

“That way the business will make progress.” (Marko)

Unexpected words came out from the boy’s mouth. It was a method that couldn’t be avoided. Marko began to explain in an indescribably happy way.

“Everyone, do you know of the medicine called “White transparent gloss” that has become famous in public recently? It’s us, who are manufacturing and selling it. Since I want to keep this a secret as much as possible, please don’t tell anyone, okay?” (Marko)

He happily looks at the surprised surrounding.

“In fact, there were two problematic parts. One was the capital investment to expand the production quantity. And the other was the increase of personnel to enlarge the market share. Although we had the funds, we would end up being targeted by scary people if we weren’t successful.” (Marko)

The boy raises a finger of his small hand for each of them, feudal lord, nobles, merchants and thieves.

“The stronghold of the Hakkinen escort group is definitely the territorial capital, but going by its nature, it will result in establishing branches at various places in the territory while increasing its personnel. The stationing of soldiers is only natural, but since our opponents are mounted bandits, it will also be necessary to have horses. What do you all, who are responsible for the management, think we have to obtain for that?” (Marko)

He counts those with the other hand. Market, transport, personnel, stables and offices.

And he showed both hands in front of his chest.

“Thanks to you, all of that is progressing smoothly. Thanks for the treat.” (Marko)

Smiling with a grin, he bowed with a bob of his head.

Being taken aback, time flows slowly as they continue to only gaze at Marko...

“An old man’s wisdom?” Jarkko boldly grumbled with a snort,

“... And you want to gather two of this lad? It will become a major disaster.”
(Jarkko)

The room burst into laughter.

Daniel was asked by the shopkeeper, who probably received complaints from the other customers, very politely to keep it down a bit as the very loud volume didn't fit with the regulations of the inn. And yet, while putting effort into suppressing the laughter, he couldn't restrain, with his hand, he bribed him by slipping a gold coin into his hands with a “Sorry, sorry.”

After that he would bribe him 3 more times. The farewell party was a heated one.

Chapter 13: Avoiding swords, hand-to-hand and the flow

“For the most part you are skilful fellow, right?” (Oiva)

While rubbing his chin with his sweaty hand, Oiva called out to the 10-years-old child in front of him.

“It’s because that’s a bamboo sword. If it was a real sword, I wouldn’t be able to even wield it like that.” (Marko)

As the other men are using the towels nearby the commonly shared water well to chill their bruises, this black-haired boy finishes wiping off his sweat. Closely observing his half-undressed body, his bodily build is still that of a child indeed. It’s not capable of swinging iron arms.

Oiva is somehow deeply moved by his memory of Marko’s smallness at the time they met. They had also talked about the bamboo swords in the dojo at that chilly night. On a first glance this young person made him feel uneasy about allowing him to go home alone, but as 4 years have passed, it became amusing since he now had the appearance of an adult.

To say nothing of this blue-eyed boy being even the superior of Oiva, who is holding the title of fourth commander of the Hakkinen guard corps, and on top of that being its leader. That is a point that everyone of the top brass knows without even needing to list it on the organization chart.

Marko of Kikomaru.

He is the one in charge of the production of the well-known medicine 「White transparent gloss」 and totally unknown to Asuria Kingdom. Thanks to the grade of efficiency in the recent stock, the cheap, low-grade items have spread even to the small and medium villages and the high-priced, high-quality items have been sold as purveyor for the nobles. It is in the process of being acknowledged as household medicine. There’s even a rumour that Earl Helrevi is smearing it day and night into his hair.

And he is the shadow leader with the authority of 「Hakkinen guard corps」, which is now approaching a number of 1000 registered mercenaries, backing him. It is a combat group supported by a great number of merchants and has

been approved by the feudal lord to be led by the Hakkinen household. Their credibility is tremendous as their way of working is reliable too. It never happens that the company is unrelated to the distribution of goods within the Helrevi territory. They are operating as semi-public military force.

Also, Bertrand, the leader of the 「Lawless organization」, has been employed in a position of being on the same eye level. Although Bertrand had quieted down completely at some point in time, he has suddenly restarted the forceful resistance and built up his reputation of having great influence in the underworld within those 2 years. Extending his influence to even other fiefdoms besides Helrevi territory, there are many skilled members within the organization.

If you combine all that, you will be able to see the dimension of Marko's existence for the Helrevi Earldom.

He is a giant.

However, he is an unknown giant. Not once has Marko's name been made public. Of course that applies to the lawless organization, but even for the Hakkinen guard corps it is Baron Daniel Hakkinen who acts as the figurehead. Even if you investigate the white transparent gloss, you will at most learn of the name Raulee. Assuming one passes beyond the secrecy at this level, they will end at the name of Kikomaru's village headman, Herman.

Marko's title is still nothing else but 「Son of the village headman」. Although, if you consider the degree of awareness of 「I remember having met someone like that as well」 in regards to Oiva, it might be the same in regards to Marko himself as well.

In reality, Marko has been declaring that he won't succeed the position of Kikomaru's village headman. In Asuria Kingdom's law the heredity of the village headman's duty is no more than a recommendation. Anyone is able to take over the duty of being village headman, if the villagers approve of them. Using this method likely had been agreed between father and child. It looks like his mother didn't know about it until the end.

Spring last year Marko's mother passed away. With tuberculosis being the direct cause, she died peacefully at the last moments at the end of being ill in bed for 10 years. It's a story from Lauri, who attended the funeral, but no matter how one looks at it, the cause of her long illness seems to be the birth of Marko. Now

that he says it, I realize there is something strange here. If you also talked about the age of his mother, she wasn't the same age as his father. As a high child death rate is the reality in farm villages, Marko is a single child.

Oiva unexpectedly tried to envision the mental state of becoming a parent. *Hoping for a child without being able to birth one and then being rewarded too late with the dearly desired son at last... and he doesn't even want to inherit the the position and duty of oneself.*

However, Oiva thinks it will be a different matter if that son is Marko. He lowered his hand because the pain in his chin had slowly faded. He had been hit at the time of their one-to-one showdown. *It would be impossible for me to reign in a son, who is able to pull off something like that at the age of 10, no matter how much I struggle.*

“... Well, you did quite the show. You slipped away unhurt from an encirclement by 5 people. Even for me that ain't simple. Though it woulda been a different matter if I had a spear.” (Oiva)

“As expected, if Oyvua-san had joined in as well, we would have done you in.”

“Ha ha, don'tcha understand? You've left your opponent pass below your crotch.” (Oiva)

Recalling the match from just before, Oiva raised a laughter. Facing 5 men, each equipped with a bamboo sword, Marko had one in each hand and one on each side of his waist. He confronted them carrying 4 bamboo swords in total. Being careful of that oddity, the 5 people encircled Marko, but when they were about to try attacking all at once, Marko threw each of the bamboo swords, held in his hands, diagonally in front. While knocking down the confused two people he threw them at, Marko ran up to the feet of the one standing in front making sure to stay low. At the same time of defending against the downwards swung blow of his opponent's bamboo sword with his left hand, he mowed down the opponent's feet by drawing his bamboo blade with his right hand and attacking with it in the same stroke. And continuing in that low stance, eventually, after smoothly slipping between their feet, he hit everyone's feet and arms. There are many reasons for the men's defeat. As a result of throwing the bamboo swords at the beginning, they ended up being vigilant towards the next

throw. As a result of getting in low between their feet, they were unable to use anything but dull sword arts. It was difficult to swing the sword differently as the one, who entered between their feet, was fighting while covering himself. And, above all, Marko understood the road to victory himself. He moved so that the men couldn't display their abilities.

Nevertheless, that doesn't mean that is weak at upright tactics. Oiva experienced that directly with his body. He confronted me in a 1-on-1 next after the 1-on-5, but not only did he aim his strikes with nimble hands but also increased the minimum pace to tire me out and thus hit my chin. It was painful.

"If it's running from place to place, I still can somehow... no, I've been told that I behave like a spoilt child." (Marko)

"Well, if you have stamina, you will somehow be able to deal with it, won'tcha?" (Oiva)

"I won't even reach up to Oiva-san's feet with at that level." (Marko)

"It's because you are 10 years old. However, are you able to ride a horse? How about equestrian archery?" (Oiva)

"I have to choose a bow. Although I'm aware of power as well as range, as for the form, I will miss it." (Marko)

"If that's the case, it's probably not impossible to do either. It's fine if you leave the wielding of long-handled spears to the surroundings." (Oiva)

Upon Oiva's words the men in the vicinity are nodding with a "Right, right" as well. New recruits haven't been brought along. All of them are men who know of battlefields. They are members of the Hakkinen guard corps affiliated with the fourth unit. In other words, they are Oiva's subordinates. Nowadays, there are 100 of the 228 of the fourth unit's troops stationed at the current Kikomaru. Everyone's warhorses is managed in the pastures of the village as well. They were even split into 4 groups to camouflage the gathering of troops. They have merely one duty.

The destruction of the mounted bandits.

It's a light cavalry of thieves appearing suddenly out of nowhere and laying waste to the territory of Earl Helrevi. They are also the reason for the foundation of the Hakkinen guard corps. It's a long-standing foe with whom they had repeatedly

numerous skirmishes during those 2 years. One can't even consider them normal thieves. Being endowed with strategical abilities and refined strength, their true nature was shrouded in secrecy for a long time.

The invisible giant called Marko grasped that secret. The market price of salt became the deciding factor for that.

The trade of salt in the kingdom is completely managed by the state. It has been recognised that the market price of salt is arbitrarily going up and down depending on the circumstances of the state. The state of the national treasury shows through the price of salt. Because the people and the nation were exhausted at the time when the future restoration project of the country's recovery was popular, the price was changed to being sensible at first. And once they would incline towards putting strength into reorganizing the national armed forces, the price would become high... everyone predicted that to happen. In reality it became like this temporarily, but after some time the price began to ease up. That was the origin of Marko's sense of discomfort.

Marko, proceeding towards the territory's capital to investigate the market price... although he planned the establishment of the guard corps on that occasion... confirmed the existence of "black-market salt" at that time. Salt, different from the one controlled by the state, must have been appearing on the market regularly in large quantities. And vast amounts of capital are flowing towards its origin.

Marko, who grasped the distribution within the territory, the range of the mounted bandits' attacks, the scale of their forces and various information from the underworld, reached a devastating conclusion.

The hidden village of the mounted bandits is located at the Heaven's Boundary Mountain Range. They are maintaining a rock salt mine and a ranch. There are two territories in the north-western part of the kingdom, namely the Earldom Salmant and the Earldom Peterius at the front line, who are wholesaling the black-market salt. The total number of cavalry, they are possessing, surpassed slightly over 1000 after having 500 before. It is a military organization under the supervision of a single, powerful commander.

And, I fear that it's likely... that it is connected to the former Salomon army. Oiva is clearly able to recall the face of Marko at the time he spoke of his final conclusion. The place was the headquarters of the guarding company in the

territorial capital. Daniel, who is holding the positions of being the commander of the first unit and the leader, Lauri, who is responsible for all parts unrelated to combat, Akseli, who is the commander of the second unit, and the fourth units' commander, Oiva. That is the line-up of the top brass.

Marko's visage was close to smiling.

Narrowing down his eyes and his lips drawing the arc of a crescent moon, he looked downwards without his shoulders being exhausted or strained. His voice resounded clearly just like the sound of a bell. It was the beautiful boy as usual. However, in spite of that... all of them had their breath taken away.

If Oiva had to express the sensation in whatever way, it would be "Demonic blade." *It's one among several even appearing commonly in illustrated stories of the church's legends. It's a dreadful sword that kills by cursing without making a distinction whether it is the one swinging it or the one it had been swung at. It is called the weapon of the one who defeated the evil king as well as the large sword possessed by the evil king. Ruin shapes its blade.*

It's not like there is such a thing. Even if it existed in the time of the legend for argument's sake, there shouldn't be anyone left who has parted with such an object either. But, if we assumed that such a thing really existed in this world currently... won't it give off this kind of dreadfulness? Oiva was convicted for it to be like that.

It was only for an instant. It's not like there is some special, secret plan if they are connected to the former Salomon army. The topic of discussion changed to drafting a concrete plan for the sake of subjugating the mounted bandits right away. However, the impact being etched into my mind as if striking at my soul hasn't vanished. It might be only a segment of a swamp if I should express my own emotions at that time in words. It was a terrific experience. Looking back at it, it was no more than an unforgettable encounter.

And, looking in front, Oiva saw the boy's expression darken.

It's not hesitation due to cowardice. The boy is grieving over how frail his own body has become. He experienced a lot of contests with the company's members, but the victories were likely something unwilling and insufficient for him. I don't understand to how much of a reference it amounts. I don't know what level he might be expecting of himself.

However, has he noticed it? Both his arms and legs cannot help but overflow

with strength even while being imbalanced. He is exposing his fighting spirit with a “Let’s do it! Let’s do it!”

“... Well, then it’s really fine?” (Marko)

Because that was an unusual tone of voice for Marko, Oiva ended up being slightly bashful. *The appearance of him peeking over here because of feeling ashamed and discreet. This is irresistible. If you saw the dreadfulness shown on that day at the guard corps’ headquarters, it’s impossible to leave him now alone understanding both sides of Marko.*

“It’s fine! Of course, there are no problems!” (Oiva)

Oyvua declared disarranging the softly, free-flowing black hair.

“Let’s go and finish off the mounted bandits together! Right, you guys!?”
(Oiva)

The men answered with applause. One after the other burly palms are approaching Marko and firmly hit his shoulders and back. It was the sound of delightfully leaving their lives in his hands. Marko, who surpassed being just a simple boy for them, was accepted as single, brave warrior due to the bouts with bamboo swords and the dialogues with Oiva.

It is a rough and sordid scene. If you call it a farce, it probably is. If you used the rules of the company, the story would finish with them being ordered 「Accompany Marko」 with an overbearing attitude. However, Oiva thinks that it’s good this way. I like this kind of method. I think it is just like blood won’t circulate between living things, something like relations won’t form by sympathy. If you count on considering the deaths of allies for the sake of the creating deaths of enemies in a war, it won’t work, however, for that reason, I always want to be a humane person.

“Thank you very much. It hurts. I look forward to work with you. Don’t stiffen my shoulders.” (Marko)

Even while being jostled, Marko is laughing. His surroundings are laughing. Has he realized it? Everyone is already treating Marko as “general” and not as “soldier” anymore.

Attracting the soldiers, he is a person holding a fragment that has a charm of cheering up... isn’t that a general’s trait? Oiva is believing this. I don’t know

whether I possess that ability or not, but Marko has it without a doubt. Furthermore, it isn't the ability of an ordinary general. It's possibly something even more superior... it might be something that Oiva can't distinct either. He might also be a giant in regards to military affairs. I don't know, however it is extremely interesting.

While once again rubbing his chin, Oiva gazed at the uncultured group that grew into a flood of dialogues and before long got carried away.

Chapter 14: Remembering how to fight

Under the cover of darkness.

The sky is billowing in a gloomy grey with no moon or stars showing their lights. Only sweat is dripping down as they are half-heartedly stroking their napes with a feeling of listlessness and a tepid mood. The breaths of the men and the horses, chewing on their wooden mouth bits, are dampening swiftly. It's the sighing of 600 riders. It might become a single scoop of hot water if it was collected in the hill's depression.

(It's an unpleasant night.)

That man, who had a golden ring coiled around his neck, spit on the ground. The strong displeasure screws up his fine-looking features as his glaring pair of eyes is scowling at the hill on the other side without swaying. Only he isn't chewing on any wood, but his mouth is closed tightly and turned down at the corners. He has a more dangerous presence than anyone else.

The man's name is Kustaa (*T/N: >> Kusuta <<*). He is the head of the mounted bandits.

He is the only one with a lining of vermilion colour, that looks as if burning, within that sea of black overcoats. The root of his spear's tip has also affixed a decoration of the same colour. Is the meaning blood, fire or passion? Whichever of those it might be, either is likely appropriate in this night. That's because they are currently about to stage an attack.

Tonight a large-scale transport unit of the territorial army is heading towards the front under the cover of the night. All of the small-scale transports here in the last few days have been merely diversions. It's also the same for the mid-scale transport tomorrow morning. The unit passing by in the dead of this night is definitely the real target.

That isn't information they obtained by coincidence either. Having endured for more than half year, they induced them so that the army cannot avoid doing it like this. Picking the transport units to be attacked, deciding on places where their appearance can be witnessed and coming up with the directions of their retreats... tonight will bear the fruits of them keeping these up persistently. The more logical the transport schedules of the territorial army got, the more their

choices for preparations converged. And now the day of harvest has arrived. *(According to the guys on the other side of this hill... we have finished confirming that the unit has started moving. Everything's going smoothly. And yet, although it's going smoothly... what's this uneasiness?)* (Kustaa)

Kustaa pulled out the hair suddenly and forcefully while scratching his head. After counting the torn off strands, he discarded them. Next he tightly grasped the lining of the overcoat drawing it toward himself. As he gazed at the wrinkles that were immediately created, he abandoned it with a thud and looked at the sky. It's only filled with soundlessly-moving, dull and bulky clouds in spite of its emptiness.

Stretching his hand to the divination board, which hung at the knapsack, Kustaa gave up on taking that into his hands. It's because he noticed the countless pairs of eyes watching him. Putting back the baggage casually, he once again gripped his favourite spear.

It's already too late for something like retreat.

These 600 mounted bandits aren't the whole lot. Over 200 mounted bandits are advancing at various places as feints. They are showing movements in a deceptive style to lead on the territorial army. Two days ago that detached force should have crossed weapons with the territorial army. After their retreat, they split into 3 groups and are continuing to attract the attention of the territorial army. If the 600 mounted bandits, who are the main unit, end up being destroyed without being able to withdraw, even that detached force will likely lose their path of retreat to the home village.

Kustaa hasn't taken the recent territorial army in this place lightly at all. In the past the territorial army gave up easily and furthermore only chased blindly after them. It doesn't feel like their degree of strength or such, once they get in contact with them, has risen, but they are in places they don't want them to be. It happened many times over that they were chased in a direction they didn't want to be chased to. They are predicting that with a strange deployment and formation.

However, if it was like that, there was also the aspect of being well-informed on their plans. If you carefully observed the principle behind the opponent's movements, it would be fine if you bent that principle in reverse. We incited them like that. The conclusion of accumulating such inducements is this hill,

but... Something doesn't make sense for Kustaa.

He is being assailed by an anxiety as if heaven and earth have been switched.

Isn't it actually as if we, who are planning to set up a trap, have been led into a trap ourselves? That hill on the other side has a big hole. Isn't it like all of us are about to jump in there? Even though all is advancing as imagined, only such uneasiness is surging forth within my heart.

(Damn it... though it's of no use whatsoever, I'm so half-baked... !) (Kustaa)

Kustaa cursed within his mind. It's his own blood.

He has a past no one is aware of. The blood of the man called Kustaa has history. Even though he discarded his surname, he isn't able to falsify the history of the blood flowing in his body. Nothing but his own body is proof of that.

There is a phenomenon called miracle.

The church dispatches miracle investigators seeking the miracles of this world. If some special phenomenon occurs and if that is acknowledged as miracle, it will result in it being embraced for a long time in the loving protection of the church. However, since the church has on the other hand the mission to expulse witches and evil men, they will hand out condemnation without mercy according to the sequence and situation. The miracle investigation is a coin flipping that ought to be feared.

They, who decided to try Kustaa's mother, showed a front of overflowing love and admiration. If there was a manifestation of God's power, it would be recognised as being a miracle. She, who immediately was bestowed the privilege of a saint, is even now living in the sanctuary "Holy Grail Island."

But, Kustaa knows about it. His mother's power isn't a miracle by no means. Instead it's the repulsive type of power. This consequently invited rumours in the city. The outcome was a miracle investigator coming to their house.

She was able to create bugs from the corpses of animals. Those aren't normal bugs either. Even without substance, they are bustling about with a faint, green light... they are shady bugs as if only the phosphorescence of summer bugs, which fly around making light from their rear, has been cut off. Their use is unknown. She was only laughing and giggling as she simply played around with them. Kustaa recalls that it spurred on a eeriness as she was a reputed, beautiful woman. She was a hated woman. He was refreshed when she disappeared.

And yet, like father like son. There is Kustaa's miracle within Kustaa. He cannot

afford for anybody to know about it, but he can't bear to get rid of it either.

My premonition is sharp... no, powerful.

I hid myself in the storage room on the days the miracle investigator came to our house. Mercilessly haunted by an oppressive feeling that something would happen day after day, I finally took action after having lost my will to endure.

I'm a rowdy person who was famous for being a thug since my childhood. I wasn't a timid person shying away from physical threats, but I couldn't oppose the threat gradually approaching from within my mind.

Putting aside whether it's good or evil, will I predict something to happen? ... I spent my time pondering about that, but there is also the possibility of dying by being involved in a landslide as I pass the next day calmly. On the contrary, not a single thing happened even as I spent the next two days without sleeping.

There was also a time I devoted myself to martial arts as I hated it to be led around by the nose, but even then my premonitions never vanished. Before I noticed it reached the point that I was accompanied by henchmen as notorious outlaw.

The man I met at such period was Salomon.

That man, who wasn't even accompanied by more than 100 followers as commanding officer at that time, overwhelmed Kustaa with a premonition so strong as it had never occurred until now. Even though he was unskilled at exchanging words as they met face-to-face, Salomon was a person with a degree of strength that completely extinguished all other premonitions. Instead of his attempt to kill him, Kustaa was beat up by the silver-haired woman, who was next to Salomon.

And he realized. He can't defy the premonition caused by Salomon anymore. Reaching out for him as if being mesmerized, the way of accepting it had already become easy. The him, who had been always exposed to premonitions. The him, who wasn't scared of the premonitions albeit not even knowing when they would appear. For the first time in his life, he bowed his head. He became one of Salomon's followers.

I remember the day I killed an Eberian imperial soldier for the first time. It was a plain person. I recall the day I straddled a warhorse for the first time. It was majestic, fast and tall. I remember the day I took charge of subordinates for the first time. There was pride in that.

However... just like that... Salomon's premonition fell apart on that day of the "Festival of the Sacred Flame." It came to an end. Kustaa shook with a feeling of emptiness that can't be described in words. Feeling a large, large hole gaping widely in his own chest, it became a habit for him to stroke his chest for a while. Kustaa remembers the day when Salomon departed to the capital as if it had been just yesterday.

Salomon as commander led a mixed army composed of the volunteer army and a mish-mash of royal troops numbering all together 13.000 troops... they were the so-called Salomon army. When a time of around 3 weeks passed after they had destroyed the army of Eberia Empire, the dissolution of the Salomon army was ordered by the headquarters of the royal army. Using the convenient situation of having accomplished the military operation, 30.000 were put under a temporary command and had already been send away to various places following their orders. Only the Salomon army continued to guard the vicinity and to deal with the remains of the battle on that soil.

It was decided to promote various commanders after the dissolution across the board. They were promised to receive their promotion only after having changed assignments. It was also decided in advance, albeit with objections to the judgement at that time, to release the volunteer soldiers, who had risen due to the danger of a ruined country, from military service. A reward was given to everyone. Although the regular army had turned up following its orders, they were instead far too late and they only considered it as an opportunity to raise military achievements, to a dreadful degree that they didn't even differentiate between friend and foe.

There were no unreasonable arguments. Many people were even delighted. However, there were also many who voiced their doubts. Kustaa also had suspicions alongside his once again revived premonitions.

It's because I didn't understand the meaning of dissolving Salomon army. Why did the strongest army, that produced the biggest military gains, end up disappearing? Before my eyes the Plains of Wandering Calamity was spreading up to the horizon and there wasn't anyone to obstruct us even if we advanced beyond that point.

The king's decree, which came before long, deepened his suspicions even further.

Only Salomon himself was to be summoned to the capital.

It was under the pretext of him being a promising person. Even that patriotic hero would say that for a person like Salomon it was only adequate to praise him for his distinguished war service at the royal capital. There was also the pretext of attending the hero's funeral. And, there was also the issue of relinquishing the family name.

As the Salomon army incorporated various units of the royal army, which escaped from the regular army, into its ranks, Salomon was temporarily established as head of the Hahato household for appearance's sake since there were also nobles, albeit of lower rank, mixed with those royal units. Given that this household had become extinct long ago, there was only Salmon belonging to the Hahato family, but that still didn't change the fact of it being a noble's family name. There was no other way but for him to relinquish the name at the capital if they wanted to dissolve the Salomon army.

Everything would be put in order so that the arrangements would be excessive. The roads would be ornamented magnificently... a road of triumphal return would be paved towards the capital. The wordly-wise man, who didn't step out of the hero's shadow, would finally be seen bathed in glory.

If that's how it was to be, why had it to be no one but Salomon himself going there?

It was his adjutant, Jikil Rosa, who voiced the strongest objection to that. Being a woman descending from a minority, she was the one who beat Kustaa, who had once attacked Salomon, to a pulp. She is a warrior who advanced to the front line disguised as man since it is prohibited for women to join the army of Asuria Kingdom. She is famous for her nickname, Jikil of the Demon Eye, but there are only few who know that she's a woman.

Jikil Rosa didn't place her trust into the kingdom from the very start. Even as she risked her life on many battlefields, it was merely for the sake of Salomon. There is nothing like loyalty to the kingdom in her. Since she resembled Kustaa in that point, only that much was reason enough to aid in her imploring, even if there was the bitter experience of being beaten half to death.

The next one to oppose was Kustaa. However, his declaration of opposition was far off from being well-reasoned. Unable to control the revived premonitions, he became frantic. There was also the reason of him having seen something he

didn't want to see.

Having looked at the ground where the imperial army was destroyed... or the place where the hero died for three weeks, Kustaa saw countless people he deemed to be miracle investigators. He hadn't forgotten their peculiar presence that scarred his mind in his childhood. Although he believed them to be investigating the hero's death at first, their investigation scope stretched out too far for that. And then he saw Salomon.

It's not like premonition is a particular patent of Kustaa. Many people recalled the unpleasant premonition at that time. As if they smelled the stench of something rotten... something sticking to the inner parts of the nose, a cold shivering within their chests and the feeling of not being able to calm down.

Salomon didn't talk much. Since an order is an order, one should obey it. I think that was opinion. Having a slightly awkward face due to Jikil Rosa's fervent speech, he turned his white eyes towards the standing Kustaa, who was wound up having foam coming out of his mouth. Kustaa had such a hunch. His memories during that tragic situation and confusion are vague.

But, even so, only the words, Salomon muttered last, are remaining in his ears. Although Kustaa fell to the point of dabbling in divination after the death of Salomon and went to travel in irritation as he wasn't able to guess the details of his premonitions, he remembered those words. You might say anxiety, fretfulness and emptiness were clinging and dwelling in those words. The words cast a previously unseen darkness. They depicted the mind of Salomon in his days of yore.

“Above not being able to see the things I want to see, there's nothing but despair... !” (Kustaa)

He spoke them as if thoroughly chewing on them. On this dark hill imposing silence upon soldiers and horses, Kustaa spit out these words.

With the sounds of wagons and horse's hooves beginning to be audible in the distance, he knows that they are gradually getting closer. The sky is ominous and even the wind is wet and glistening. However, Kustaa raises his hand, resulting in the blades of 600 horsemen flashing. And... he swung his hand downwards.

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Glossary



**PLEASE NOTICE: THIS GLOSSARY MIGHT CONTAIN SPOILERS!!!
IF YOU HAVEN'T READ UP UNTIL THE LATEST CHAPTER YOU ARE
ADVISED TO NOT CONSULT THIS GLOSSARY!!!**

Characters

Cast affiliated with the MC

Marko – MC of this story. Blue-eyed with black hair and strange powers. A character of unknown origin and birth but with a strange maturity.

Herman – MC's father and village headman of Kikomura.

Hannah – The caretaker of MC's mother, who is very sick, in Kikomura. She idolizes the MC.

Lauri – A peddler who first met the MC while visiting Kikomura. Estimated to become MC's advisor in the future.

Oiva Otara – A good-for-nothing living in a town in Earldom Helrevi. He is a robust man who trains daily in a dojo. Formerly belonging to the volunteer army of Asuria Kingdom.

Bertrand – A former mercenary fighting on Empire Eberia's side, renown as Bertrand of the Green Cloth. Before swearing allegiance to the MC he lived as gangster boss in the same town as Oyvua.

Akseli Anel – First Lieutenant of the Helrevi feudal army. Demoted to do inspections at the frontier villages and other miscellaneous tasks.

Jikil Rosa – Female soldier hailing from the northern tribes. She used to fight at the side of Salomon in the previous war. The MC has ordered Bertrand to find her. Nicknamed Jikil of the Demon Eyes.

Daniel Hakkinen – Fallen noble, whose father and elder brother fought alongside the hero but due to their disgraceful behaviour, the Hakkinen family was banished to a remote region.

Kosta – Leader of the mounted bandits. Former commanding officer in Salomon's army.

Jarkko – Veteran soldier. Befriended with Akseli.

Political cast

Mathias Helrevi – The lord of the territorial capital of Earldom Helrevi.

Joakim – Priest of the church. Directed the burning at the stake of Salomon

Locations



Kikomura – The village the MC grew up.

Asuria Kingdom – The left half of the above map. It's the country where the story of the MC starts.

Eberia Empire – The right half of the map above. It's the country having a long-lasting animosity against Asuria Kingdom.

Earldom Helrevi – A frontier region. Kikomura belongs to said earldom.

Earldom Salmant – Bordering to the Plain of Wandering Calamity on Asuria's side. Frontier region against the attacks from Eberia.

Earldom Peterius – Bordering to the Plain of Wandering Calamity on Asuria's side. Frontier region against the attacks from Eberia.

Plain of Wandering Calamity – A desert separating Eberia and Asuria. Location of the last bloody war.